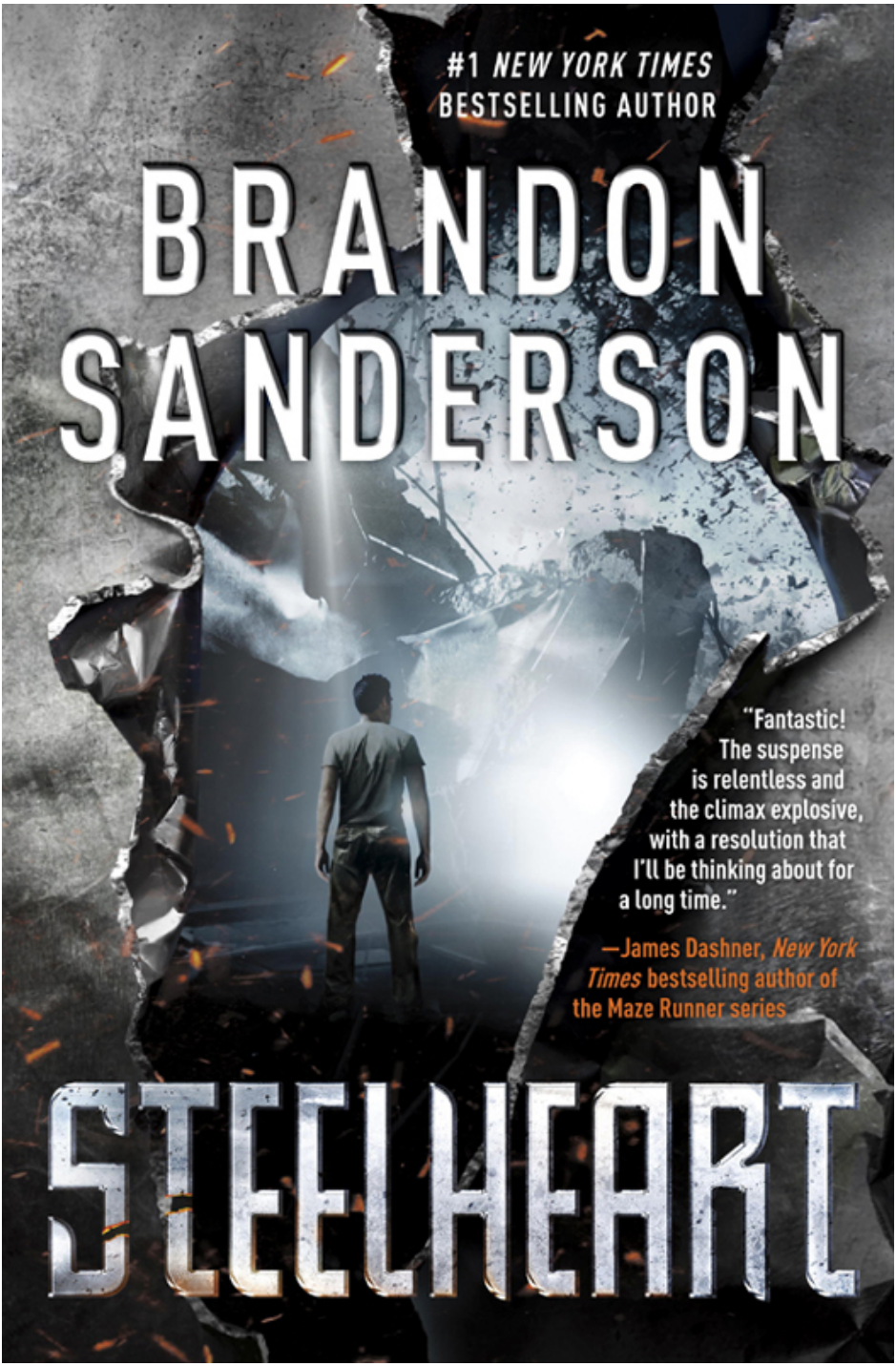
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STEELHEART

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BRANDON SANDERSON

DELACORTE PRESS

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For Dallin Sanderson,
who fights evil each day with his smile

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Prologue

I'VE seen Steelheart bleed.

It happened ten years ago; I was eight. My father and I were at the First Union Bank on Adams Street. We used the old street names back then, before the Annexation.

The bank was enormous. A single open chamber with white pillars surrounding a tile mosaic floor, broad doors that led deeper into the building. Two large revolving doors opened onto the street, with a set of conventional doors to the sides. Men and women streamed in and out, as if the room were the heart of some enormous beast, pulsing with a lifeblood of people and cash.

I knelt backward on a chair that was too big for me, watching the flow of people. I liked to watch people. The different shapes of faces, the hairstyles, the clothing, the expressions. Everyone showed so much *variety* back then. It was exciting.

"David, turn around, please," my father said. He had a soft voice. I'd never heard it raised, save for that one time at my mother's funeral. Thinking of his agony on that day still makes me shiver.

I turned around, sullen. We were to the side of the main bank chamber in one of the cubicles where the mortgage men worked. Our cubicle had glass sides, which made it less confining, but it still felt fake. There were little wood-framed pictures of family members on the walls, a cup of cheap candy with a glass lid on the desk, and a vase with faded plastic flowers on the filing cabinet.

It was an imitation of a comfortable home. Much like the man

in front of us wore an imitation of a smile.

"If we had more collateral …," the mortgage man said, showing teeth.

"Everything I own is on there," my father said, indicating the paper on the desk in front of us. His hands were thick with calluses, his skin tan from days spent working in the sun. My mother would have winced if she'd seen him go to a fancy appointment like this wearing his work jeans and an old T-shirt with a comic book character on it.

At least he'd combed his hair, though it was starting to thin. He didn't care about that as much as other men seemed to. "Just means fewer haircuts, Dave," he'd tell me, laughing as he ran his fingers through his wispy hair. I didn't point out that he was wrong. He would still have to get the same number of haircuts, at least until all of his hair fell out.

"I just don't think I can do anything about this," the mortgage man said. "You've been told before."

"The other man said it would be enough," my father replied, his large hands clasped before him. He looked concerned. Very concerned.

The mortgage man just continued to smile. He tapped the stack of papers on his desk. "The world is a much more dangerous place now, Mr. Charleston. The bank has decided against taking risks."

"Dangerous?" my father asked.

"Well, you know, the Epics …"

"But they *aren't* dangerous," my father said passionately. "The Epics are here to help."

Not this again, I thought.

The mortgage man's smile finally broke, as if he was taken aback by my father's tone.

"Don't you see?" my father said, leaning forward. "This isn't a dangerous time. It's a wonderful time!"

The mortgage man cocked his head. "Didn't your previous home get *destroyed* by an Epic?"

"Where there are villains, there will be heroes," my father said. "Just wait. They *will* come."

I believed him. A lot of people thought like he did, back then. It had only been two years since Calamity appeared in the sky. One year since ordinary men started changing. Turning into Epics

—almost like superheroes from the stories.

We were still hopeful then. And ignorant.

"Well," the mortgage man said, clasping his hands on the table right beside a picture frame displaying a stock photo of smiling ethnic children. "Unfortunately, our underwriters don't agree with your assessment. You'll have to …"

They kept talking, but I stopped paying attention. I let my eyes wander back toward the crowds, then turned around again, kneeling on the chair. My father was too engrossed in the conversation to scold me.

So I was actually watching when the Epic strolled into the bank. I noticed him immediately, though nobody else seemed to pay him much heed. Most people say you can't tell an Epic from an ordinary man unless he starts using his powers, but they're wrong. Epics carry themselves differently. That sense of confidence, that subtle self-satisfaction. I've always been able to spot them.

Even as a kid I knew there was something different about that man. He wore a relaxed-fitting black business suit with a light tan shirt underneath, no tie. He was tall and lean, but *solid*, like a lot of Epics are. Muscled and toned in a way that you could see even through the loose clothing.

He strode to the center of the room. Sunglasses hung from his breast pocket, and he smiled as he put them on. Then he raised a finger and pointed with a casual tapping motion at a passing woman.

She vaporized to dust, clothing burning away, skeleton falling forward and clattering to the floor. Her earrings and wedding ring didn't dissolve, though. They hit the floor with distinct *pings* I could hear even over the noise in the room.

The room fell still. People froze, horrified. Conversations stopped, though the mortgage man kept right on rambling, lecturing my father.

He finally choked off as the screaming began.

I don't remember how I felt. Isn't that odd? I can remember the lighting—those magnificent chandeliers up above, sprinkling the room with bits of refracted light. I can remember the lemon-ammonia scent of the recently cleaned floor. I can remember all too well the piercing shouts of terror, the mad cacophony as people scrambled for doors.

Most clearly, I remember the Epic smiling broadly—almost leering—as he pointed at people passing, reducing them to ash and bones with a mere gesture.

I was transfixed. Perhaps I was in shock. I clung to the back of my chair, watching the slaughter with wide eyes.

Some people near the doors escaped. Anyone who got too close to the Epic died. Several employees and customers huddled together on the ground or hid behind desks. Strangely, the room grew still. The Epic stood as if he were alone, bits of paper floating down through the air, bones and black ash scattered on the floor about him.

"I am called Deathpoint," he said. "It's not the cleverest of names, I'll admit. But I find it memorable." His voice was eerily conversational, as if he were chatting with friends over drinks.

He began to stroll through the room. "A thought occurred to me this morning," he said. The room was large enough that his voice echoed. "I was showering, and it struck me. It asked … Deathpoint, why are you going to rob a bank today?"

He pointed lazily at a pair of security guards who had edged out of a side hallway just beside the mortgage cubicles. The guards turned to dust, their badges, belt buckles, guns, and bones hitting the floor. I could hear their bones knock against one another as they dropped. There are a lot of bones in a man's body, more than I'd realized, and they made a big mess when they scattered. An odd detail to notice about the horrible scene. But I remember it distinctly.

A hand clasped my shoulder. My father had crouched low before his chair and was trying to pull me down, to keep the Epic from seeing me. But I wouldn't move, and my father couldn't force me without making a scene.

"I've been planning this for weeks, you see," the Epic said. "But the thought only struck me this morning. Why? Why rob the bank? I can take anything I want anyway! It's ridiculous!" He leaped around the side of a counter, causing the teller cowering there to scream. I could just barely make her out, huddled on the floor.

"Money is worthless to me, you see," the Epic said. "*Completely* worthless." He pointed. The woman shriveled to ash and bone.

The Epic pivoted, pointing at several places around the room, killing people who were trying to flee. Last of all, he pointed

directly at me.

Finally I felt an emotion. A spike of terror.

A skull hit the desk behind us, bouncing off and spraying ash as it clattered to the floor. The Epic had pointed not at me but at the mortgage man, who had been hiding by his desk behind me. Had the man tried to run?

The Epic turned back toward the tellers behind the counter. My father's hand still gripped my shoulder, tense. I could feel his worry for me almost as if it were a physical thing, running up his arm and into my own.

I felt terror then. Pure, immobilizing terror. I curled up on the chair, whimpering, shaking, trying to banish from my mind the images of the terrible deaths I'd just seen.

My father pulled his hand away. "Don't move," he mouthed.

I nodded, too scared to do anything else. My father glanced around his chair. Deathpoint was chatting with one of the tellers. Though I couldn't see them, I could hear when the bones fell. He was executing them one at a time.

My father's expression grew dark. Then he glanced toward a side hallway. Escape?

No. That was where the guards had fallen. I could see through the glass side of the cubicle to where a handgun lay on the ground, barrel buried in ash, part of the grip lying atop a rib bone. My father eyed it. He'd been in the National Guard when he was younger.

Don't do it! I thought, panicked. *Father, no!* I couldn't voice the words, though. My chin quivered as I tried to speak, like I was cold, and my teeth chattered. What if the Epic heard me?

I couldn't let my father do such a foolish thing! He was all I had. No home, no family, no mother. As he moved to go, I forced myself to reach out and grab his arm. I shook my head at him, trying to think of anything that would stop him. "Please," I managed to whisper. "The heroes. You said they'll come. Let them stop him!"

"Sometimes, son," my father said, prying my fingers free, "you have to help the heroes along."

He glanced at Deathpoint, then scrambled into the next cubicle. I held my breath and peeked very carefully around the side of the chair. I had to know. Even cowering and trembling, I had to see.

Deathpoint hopped over the counter and landed on the other

side, our side. “And so, it doesn’t matter,” he said, still speaking in a conversational tone, strolling across the floor. “Robbing a bank would give me money, but I don’t need to *buy* things.” He raised a murderous finger. “A conundrum. Fortunately, while showering, I realized something else: killing people every time you want something can be extremely inconvenient. What I needed to do was *frighten* everyone, show them my power. That way, in the future, nobody would deny me the things I wanted to take.”

He leaped around a pillar on the other side of the bank, surprising a woman holding her child. “Yes,” he continued, “robbing a bank for the money would be pointless—but showing what I can do … that is still important. So I continued with my plan.” He pointed, killing the child, leaving the horrified woman holding a pile of bones and ash. “Aren’t you glad?”

I gaped at the sight, the terrified woman trying to hold the blanket tight, the infant’s bones shifting and slipping free. In that moment it all became so much more *real* to me. Horribly real. I felt a sudden nausea.

Deathpoint’s back was toward us.

My father scrambled out of the cubicle and grabbed the fallen gun. Two people hiding behind a nearby pillar made for the closest doorway and pushed past my father in their haste, nearly knocking him down.

Deathpoint turned. My father was still kneeling there, trying to get the pistol raised, fingers slipping on the ash-covered metal.

The Epic raised his hand.

“What are you doing here?” a voice boomed.

The Epic spun. So did I. I think everyone must have turned toward that deep, powerful voice.

A figure stood in the doorway to the street. He was backlit, little more than a silhouette because of the bright sunlight shining in behind him. An amazing, herculean, awe-inspiring silhouette.

You’ve probably seen pictures of Steelheart, but let me tell you that pictures are completely inadequate. No photograph, video, or painting could *ever* capture that man. He wore black. A shirt, tight across an inhumanly large and strong chest. Pants, loose but not baggy. He didn’t wear a mask, like some of the early Epics did, but a magnificent silver cape fluttered out behind him.

He didn't *need* a mask. This man had no reason to hide. He spread his arms out from his sides, and wind blew the doors open around him. Ash scattered across the floor and papers fluttered. Steelheart rose into the air a few inches, cape flaring out. He began to glide forward into the room. Arms like steel girders, legs like mountains, neck like a tree stump. He wasn't bulky or awkward, though. He was *majestic*, with that jet-black hair, that square jaw, an impossible physique, and a frame of nearly seven feet.

And those eyes. Intense, demanding, *uncompromising* eyes.

As Steelheart flew gracefully into the room, Deathpoint hastily raised a finger and pointed at him. Steelheart's shirt sizzled in one little section, like a cigarette had been put out on the cloth, but he showed no reaction. He floated down the steps and landed gently on the floor a short distance from Deathpoint, his enormous cape settling around him.

Deathpoint pointed again, looking frantic. Another meager sizzle. Steelheart stepped up to the smaller Epic, towering over him.

I knew in that moment that this was what my father had been waiting for. This was the hero everyone had been hoping would come, the one who would compensate for the other Epics and their evil ways. This man was here to save us.

Steelheart reached out, grabbing Deathpoint as he belatedly tried to dash away. Deathpoint jerked to a halt, his sunglasses clattering to the ground, and gasped in pain.

"I asked you a question," Steelheart said in a voice like rumbling thunder. He spun Deathpoint around to look him in the eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Deathpoint twitched. He looked panicked. "I … I …"

Steelheart raised his other hand, lifting a finger. "I have claimed this city, little Epic. It is *mine*." He paused. "And it is *my* right to dominate the people here, not yours."

Deathpoint cocked his head.

What? I thought.

"You seem to have strength, little Epic," Steelheart said, glancing at the bones scattered around the room. "I will accept your subservience. Give me your loyalty or die."

I couldn't believe Steelheart's words. They stunned me as soundly as Deathpoint's murders had.

That concept—*serve me or die*—would become the foundation of his rule. He looked around the room and spoke in a booming voice. “I am emperor of this city now. You will obey me. I own this land. I own these buildings. When you pay taxes, they come to me. If you disobey, you will die.”

Impossible, I thought. *Not him too*. I couldn’t accept that this incredible being was just like all the others.

I wasn’t the only one.

“It’s not supposed to be this way,” my father said.

Steelheart turned, apparently surprised to hear anything from one of the room’s cowering, whimpering peons.

My father stepped forward, gun down at his side. “No,” he said. “You aren’t like the others. I can see it. You’re better than they are.” He walked forward, stopping only a few feet from the two Epics. “You’re here to save us.”

The room was silent save for the sobbing of the woman who still clutched the remains of her dead child. She was madly, vainly trying to gather the bones, to not leave a single tiny vertebra on the ground. Her dress was covered in ash.

Before either Epic could respond, the side doors burst open. Men in black armor with assault rifles piled into the bank and opened fire.

Back then, the government hadn’t given up yet. They still tried to fight the Epics, to subject them to mortal laws. It was clear from the beginning that when it came to Epics, you didn’t hesitate, you didn’t negotiate. You came in with guns blazing and hoped that the Epic you were facing could be killed by ordinary bullets.

My father sprang away at a run, old battle instincts prompting him to put his back to a pillar nearer the front of the bank. Steelheart turned, a bemused look on his face, as a wave of bullets washed over him. They bounced off his skin, ripping his clothing but leaving him completely unscathed.

Epics like him are what forced the United States to pass the Capitulation Act that gave all Epics complete immunity from the law. Gunfire cannot harm Steelheart—rockets, tanks, the most advanced weapons of man don’t even scratch him. Even if he could be captured, prisons couldn’t hold him.

The government eventually declared men such as Steelheart to be natural forces, like hurricanes or earthquakes. Trying to tell

Steelheart that he can't take what he wants would be as vain as trying to pass a bill that forbids the wind to blow.

In the bank that day, I saw with my own eyes why so many have decided not to fight back. Steelheart raised a hand, energy beginning to glow around it with a cool yellow light. Deathpoint hid behind him, sheltered from the bullets. Unlike Steelheart, he seemed to fear getting shot. Not all Epics are impervious to gunfire, just the most powerful ones.

Steelheart released a burst of yellow-white energy from his hand, vaporizing a group of the soldiers. Chaos followed. Soldiers ducked for cover wherever they could find it; smoke and chips of marble filled the air. One of the soldiers fired some kind of rocket from his gun, and it shot past Steelheart—who continued to blast his enemies with energy—to hit the back end of the bank, blowing open the vault.

Flaming bills exploded outward. Coins sprayed into the air and showered the ground.

Shouts. Screams. Insanity.

The soldiers died quickly. I continued to huddle on my chair, hands pressed against my ears. It was all so *loud*.

Deathpoint was still standing behind Steelheart. And as I watched, he smiled, then raised his hands, reaching for Steelheart's neck. I don't know what he was planning to do. Likely he had a second power. Most Epics as strong as he was possess more than one.

Maybe it would have been enough to kill Steelheart. I doubt it, but either way, we'll never know.

A single *pop* sounded in the air. The explosion had been so loud it left me deafened to the point that I barely recognized the sound as a gunshot. As the smoke from the explosion cleared, I could see my father. He stood a short distance in front of Steelheart with arms raised, his back to the pillar. He bore an expression of determination on his face and held the gun, pointing it at Steelheart.

No. Not at *Steelheart*. At Deathpoint, who stood just behind him.

Deathpoint collapsed, a bullet wound in his forehead. Dead. Steelheart turned sharply, looking at the lesser Epic. Then he looked back at my father and raised a hand to his face. There, on Steelheart's cheek just below his eye, was a line of blood.

At first I thought it must have come from Deathpoint. But when Steelheart wiped it away, it continued to bleed.

My father had shot at Deathpoint, but the bullet had passed by Steelheart first—and had grazed him on the way.

That bullet had *hurt* Steelheart, while the soldiers' bullets had bounced off.

"I'm sorry," my father said, sounding anxious. "He was reaching for you. I—"

Steelheart's eyes went wide, and he raised his hand before him, looking at his own blood. He seemed completely astounded. He glanced at the vault behind him, then looked at my father. In the settling smoke and dust, the two figures stood before each other—one a massive, regal Epic, the other a small homeless man with a silly T-shirt and worn jeans.

Steelheart jumped forward with blinding speed and slammed a hand against my father's chest, crushing him back against the white stone pillar. Bones shattered, and blood poured from my father's mouth.

"No!" I screamed. My own voice felt odd in my ears, like I was underwater. I wanted to run to him, but I was too frightened. I still think of my cowardice that day, and it sickens me.

Steelheart stepped to the side, picking up the gun my father had dropped. Fury burning in his eyes, Steelheart pointed the gun directly at my father's chest, then fired a single shot into the already-fallen man.

He does that. Steelheart likes to kill people with their own guns. It's become one of his hallmarks. He has incredible strength and can fire blasts of energy from his hands. But when it comes to killing someone he deems worth his special attention, he prefers to use their gun.

Steelheart left my father to slump down the pillar and tossed the handgun at his feet. Then he began to shoot blasts of energy in all directions, setting chairs, walls, counters, everything alight. I was thrown from my chair as one of the blasts struck nearby, and I rolled to the floor.

The explosions threw wood and glass into the air, shaking the room. In a few heartbeats, Steelheart caused enough destruction to make Deathpoint's murder spree seem tame. Steelheart laid waste to that room, knocking down pillars, killing anyone he saw. I'm not sure how I survived, crawling over the shards of glass and

splinters of wood, plaster, and dust raining down around me.

Steelheart let out a scream of rage and indignation. I could barely hear it, but I could *feel* it shattering what windows remained, vibrating the walls. Then something spread out from him, a wave of energy. And the floor around him changed colors, transforming to metal.

The transformation spread, washing through the entire room at incredible speed. The floor beneath me, the wall beside me, the bits of glass on the ground—it all changed to steel. What we've learned now is that Steelheart's rage transforms inanimate objects around him into steel, though it leaves living things and anything close to them alone.

By the time his cry faded, most of the bank's interior had been changed completely to steel, though a large chunk of the ceiling was still wood and plaster, as was a section of one wall. Steelheart suddenly launched himself into the air, breaking through the ceiling and several stories to head into the sky.

I stumbled to my father, hoping he could do something, somehow stop the madness. When I got to him, he was spasming, blood covering his face, chest bleeding from the bullet wound. I clung to his arm, panicked.

Incredibly, he managed to speak, but I couldn't hear what he said. I was deafened completely by that point. My father reached out, a quivering hand touching my chin. He said something else, but I still couldn't hear him.

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, then tried to pull his arm to get him to stand up and come with me. The entire building was shaking.

My father grabbed my shoulder, and I looked at him, tears in my eyes. He spoke a single word—one I could make out from the movement of his lips.

"Go."

I understood. Something huge had just happened, something that exposed Steelheart, something that terrified him. He was a new Epic back then, not very well known in town, but I'd heard of him. He was supposed to be invulnerable.

That gunshot had wounded him, and everyone there had seen him weak. There was no way he'd let us live—he had to preserve his secret.

Tears streaming down my cheeks, feeling like an utter coward

for leaving my father, I turned and ran. The building continued to tremble with explosions; walls cracked, sections of the ceiling crumbled. Steelheart was trying to bring it down.

Some people ran out the front doors, but Steelheart killed them from above. Others ran out side doors, but those doorways only led deeper into the bank. Those people were crushed as most of the building collapsed.

I hid in the vault.

I wish I could claim that I was smart for making that choice, but I'd simply gotten turned around. I vaguely remember crawling into a dark corner and curling up into a ball, crying as the rest of the building fell apart. Since most of the main room had been turned to metal by Steelheart's rage, and the vault was steel in the first place, those areas didn't crumble as the rest of the building did.

Hours later, I was pulled out of the wreckage by a rescue worker. I was dazed, barely conscious, and the light blinded me as I was dug free. The room I had been in had sunk partially, lurched on its side, but it was still strangely intact, the walls and most of the ceiling now made of steel. The rest of the large building was rubble.

The rescue worker whispered something in my ear. "Pretend to be dead." Then she carried me to a line of corpses and put a blanket over me. She'd guessed what Steelheart might do to survivors.

Once she went back to look for other survivors, I panicked and crawled from beneath the blanket. It was dark outside, though it should have only been late afternoon. Nightwielder was upon us; Steelheart's reign had begun.

I stumbled away and limped into an alley. That saved my life a second time. Moments after I escaped, Steelheart returned, floating down past the rescue lights to land beside the wreckage. He carried someone with him, a thin woman with her hair in a bun. I would later learn she was an Epic named Faultline, who had the power to move earth. Though she would one day challenge Steelheart, at that point she served him.

She waved her hand and the ground began to shake.

I fled, confused, frightened, pained. Behind me, the ground opened up, swallowing the remnants of the bank—along with the corpses of the fallen, the survivors who were receiving medical

attention, and the rescue workers themselves. Steelheart wanted to leave no evidence. He had Faultline bury all of them under hundreds of feet of earth, killing anyone who could possibly speak of what had happened in that bank.

Except me.

Later that night, he performed the Great Transfersion, an awesome display of power by which he transformed most of Chicago—buildings, vehicles, streets—into steel. That included a large portion of Lake Michigan, which became a glassy expanse of black metal. It was there that he built his palace.

I know, better than anyone else, that there are no heroes coming to save us. There are no good Epics. None of them protect us. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

We live with them. We try to exist *despite* them. Once the Capitulation Act was passed, most people stopped fighting. In some areas of what we now call the Fractured States, the old government is still marginally in control. They let the Epics do as they please, and try to continue as a broken society. Most places are chaos, though, with no law at all.

In a few places, like Newcago, a single godlike Epic rules as a tyrant. Steelheart has no rivals here. Everyone knows he's invulnerable. Nothing harms him: not bullets, not explosions, not electricity. In the early years, other Epics tried to take him down and claim his throne, as Faultline attempted.

They're all dead. Now it's very rare that any of them tries.

However, if there's one fact we can hold on to, it's this: *every* Epic has a weakness. Something that invalidates their powers, something that turns them back into an ordinary person, if only for a moment. Steelheart is no exception; the events on that day in the bank prove it.

My mind holds a clue to how Steelheart might be killed. Something about the bank, the situation, the gun, or my father himself was able to counteract Steelheart's invulnerability. Many of you probably know about that scar on Steelheart's cheek. Well, as far as I can determine, I'm the only living person who knows how he got it.

I've seen Steelheart bleed.

And I *will* see him bleed again.

PART ONE

1

I skidded down a stairwell and crunched against steel gravel at the bottom. Sucking in air, I dashed through one of the dark understreets of Newcago. Ten years had passed since my father's death. That fateful day had become known by most people as the Annexation.

I wore a loose leather jacket and jeans, and had my rifle slung over my shoulder. The street was dark, even though it was one of the shallow understreets with grates and holes looking up into the sky.

It's always dark in Newcago. Nightwielder was one of the first Epics to swear allegiance to Steelheart, and is a member of his inner circle. Because of Nightwielder there are no sunrises, and no moon to speak of, just pure darkness in the sky. All the time, every day. The only thing you can see up there is Calamity, which looks kind of like a bright red star or comet. Calamity began to shine one year before men started turning into Epics. Nobody knows why or how it still shines through the darkness. Of course, nobody knows why the Epics started appearing, or what their connection is to Calamity either.

I kept running, cursing myself for not leaving earlier. The lights along the ceiling of the understreet flickered, their coverings tinted blue. The understreet was littered with its typical losers: addicts at corners, dealers—or worse—in alleyways. There were some furtive groups of workers going to or from their jobs, thick coats and collars flipped up to hide their faces. They walked hunched over, eyes on the ground.

I'd spent most of the last decade among people like them,

working at a place we simply called the Factory. Part orphanage, part school, it was mostly a way to exploit children for free labor. At least the Factory had given me a room and food for the better part of ten years. That had been way better than living on the street, and I hadn't minded for one moment working for my food. Child labor laws were relics of a time when people could care about such things.

I pushed my way past a pack of workers. One cursed at me in a language that sounded vaguely Spanish. I looked up to see where I was. Most intersections were marked by spray-painted street names on the gleaming metallic walls.

When the Great Transfersion caused the better part of the Old City to be turned into solid steel, that included the soil and rock, dozens—maybe hundreds—of feet down into the ground. During the early years of his reign, Steelheart pretended to be a benevolent—if ruthless—dictator. His Diggers had cut out several levels of understreets, complete with buildings, and people had flowed to Newcago for work.

Life had been difficult here, but it had been chaos everywhere else—Epics warring with one another over territory, various para-governmental or state military groups trying to claim land. Newcago was different. Here you could be casually murdered by an Epic who didn't like the way you looked at him, but at least there was electricity, water, and food. People adapt. That's what we do.

Except for the ones who refuse to.

Come on, I thought, checking the time on my mobile, which I wore in the forearm mount of my coat. *Blasted rail line outage*. I took another shortcut, barreling through an alleyway. It was dim, but after ten years of living in perpetual gloom, you got used to it.

I passed huddled forms of sleeping beggars, then leaped over one sprawled in the street at the end of the alleyway and burst out onto Siegel Street, a wider thoroughfare that was better lit than most. Here, one level underground, the Diggers had hollowed out rooms that people used as shops. They were closed up for the moment, though more than a few had someone watching out front with a shotgun. Steelheart's police theoretically patrolled the understreets, but they rarely came to help except in the worst cases.

Originally, Steelheart had spoken of a grand underground city that would stretch down dozens of levels. That was before the Diggers had gone mad, before Steelheart had given up the pretense of caring about the people in the understreets. Still, these upper levels weren't terrible. At least there was a sense of organization, and plenty of burrowed-out holes to use as homes.

The lights in the ceiling here were faintly green and yellow, alternating. If you knew the color patterns of the various streets, you could navigate pretty well through the understreets. The top levels, at least. Even veterans of the city tended to avoid the lower levels, called the steel catacombs, where it was too easy to get lost.

Two blocks to Schuster Street, I thought, glancing through a gap in the ceiling toward the better-lit, gleaming skyscrapers above. I jogged the two blocks, then swerved into a stairwell going up, feet falling on steel steps that reflected the dim, half-functional lights.

I scrambled out onto a metal street, then immediately ducked into an alleyway. A lot of people said that the overstreets weren't nearly as dangerous as the understreets, but I never felt comfortable on them. I never felt safe anywhere, to be honest, not even at the Factory with the other kids. But up here … up here there were Epics.

Carrying a rifle around the understreets was common practice, but up here it could draw attention from Steelheart's soldiers or a passing Epic. It was best to remain hidden. I crouched beside some boxes in the alleyway, catching my breath. I glanced at my mobile, tapping over to a basic map of the area, then looked up.

Directly across from me was a building with red neon lettering. The Reeve Playhouse. As I watched, people began pouring out the front, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd made it just as the play ended.

The people were all overstreeters, in dark suits and colorful dresses. Some would be Epics, but most would not. Instead they were those who had somehow gotten ahead in life. Perhaps Steelheart favored them for tasks they performed, or perhaps they had simply been born to rich parents. Steelheart could take anything he wanted, but to have an empire he needed people to help rule. Bureaucrats, officers in his army, accountants, trading gurus, diplomats. Like the upper crust of an old-school

dictatorship, these people lived off the crumbs that Steelheart left behind.

That meant they were almost as culpable as the Epics in keeping the rest of us oppressed, but I didn't bear them much ill will. The way the world was these days, you did what you had to in order to survive.

They had an old-fashioned style—it was the current trend. The men wore hats, and the women's dresses looked like those from pictures I'd seen of old Prohibition days. It was a direct contrast to the modern steel buildings and the distant thumping of an advanced Enforcement copter.

The opulent people suddenly began moving out of the way, making room for a man in a bright red pinstriped suit, a red fedora, and a deep red and black cape.

I ducked down a little lower. It was Fortuity. He was an Epic with precognition powers. He could guess the numbers that would come up on a dice roll, for instance, or foretell the weather. He could also sense danger, and that elevated him to High Epic status. You couldn't kill a man like him with a simple rifle shot. He would know the shot was coming and would dodge it before you pulled the trigger. His powers were so well attuned that he could avoid a machine-gun barrage, and he would also know if his food had been poisoned or if a building was rigged with explosives.

High Epics. They're blasted hard to kill.

Fortuity was a moderately high-ranking member of Steelheart's government. Not part of his innermost circle, like Nightwielder, Firefight, or Conflux, but powerful enough to be feared by most of the minor Epics in town. He had a long face and a hawkish nose. He strolled to the curb in front of the playhouse, lighting a cigarette as the other patrons spilled out behind him. Two women in sleek gowns hung on his elbows.

I itched to unsling my rifle and take a shot at him. He was a sadistic monster. He claimed his powers worked best when practicing an art called extispicy: the reading of the entrails of dead creatures to divine the future. Fortuity preferred to use human entrails, and he liked them fresh.

I held myself back. The moment I decided to try to shoot him, his powers would activate. Fortuity had nothing to fear from a lone sniper. He probably thought he didn't have anything to fear

at all. If my information was right, the next hour would prove him very wrong on that count.

Come on, I thought. *This is the best time to move against him. I'm right. I've* got *to be.*

Fortuity took a drag on his cigarette, nodding to a few people who passed by. He had no bodyguards. Why would he need bodyguards? His fingers glittered with rings, though wealth was meaningless to him. Even without Steelheart's rules granting him the right to take what he wanted, Fortuity could win a fortune in any gambling house on any day he chose.

Nothing happened. Had I been wrong? I'd been so *sure*. Bilko's information was usually up to date. Word in the understreets was that the Reckoners were back in Newcago. Fortuity *was* the Epic they'd target. I knew this. I'd made a habit—maybe even a quest—of studying the Reckoners. I—

A woman walked past Fortuity. Tall, lithe, and golden-haired, and perhaps twenty years old, she wore a thin red dress with a plunging neckline. Even with two beauties on his arms, Fortuity turned and stared at her. She hesitated, glancing back at him. Then she smiled and walked up, hips undulating back and forth.

I couldn't hear what they said, but in the end, this newcomer displaced the other women. She led Fortuity down the road, whispering in his ear and laughing. The other two women waited behind, arms crossed, not daring to complain. Fortuity did *not* like his women to speak back to him.

This had to be it. I wanted to get ahead of them, but couldn't do so on the street itself. Instead I moved back through a few alleyways. I knew the area perfectly; studying maps of the theater district was what had almost made me late.

I hustled around the back of a building, sticking to the shadows, and arrived at another alleyway. From here I could peek out and see the same road, but from another angle. Fortuity ambled along the steel sidewalk outside.

The area was lit by lamps hanging from streetlights. The streetlights themselves had been turned to steel during the transfersion—electronics and bulbs included. They no longer worked, but they did provide a convenient place to hang lanterns.

Those lanterns left pools of light that the pair moved through, in and out. I held my breath, watching closely. Fortuity was packing a weapon for certain. The suit was tailored to hide the

bulge under his arm, but I could still make out where his holster was.

Fortuity didn't have any directly offensive powers, but that didn't really matter. His precognition powers meant he never missed with a handgun, no matter how wild the shot seemed. If he decided to kill you, you had a couple of seconds to respond, or you'd be dead.

The woman didn't appear to be carrying a weapon, though I couldn't be certain. That dress showed plenty of curves. A gun strapped to her thigh, perhaps? I looked closer as she moved into another pool of light, though I found myself staring at her, rather than looking for weapons. She was gorgeous. Eyes that glittered, bright red lips, golden hair. And that low neckline …

I shook myself. *Idiot*, I thought. *You have a purpose. Women interfere with things like a purpose*.

But even a ninety-year-old blind priest would stop and stare at this woman. If he weren't blind, that is. *Dumb metaphor*, I thought. *I'll have to work on that one*. I have trouble with metaphors.

Focus. I raised my rifle, leaving on the safety and using the scope for its zoom. Where were they going to hit him? The street here ran through several blocks of gloomy darkness—broken only by the lanterns—before intersecting Burnley Street. That was a major hub of the local dance scene. Likely the woman had enticed Fortuity to join her at a club. The quickest route was through this dark, less-populated street.

The empty street was a very good sign. The Reckoners rarely struck at an Epic who was in too public an area. They didn't like innocent casualties. I tilted the rifle up and scanned the skyrise windows with my scope. Some of the glass-turned-steel windows had been cut out and replaced with glass again. Was anyone up there watching?

I'd been hunting the Reckoners for years. They were the only ones who still fought back, a shadowy group that stalked, entrapped, and assassinated powerful Epics. The Reckoners, *they* were the heroes. Not what my father had imagined—no Epic powers, no flashy costumes. They didn't stand for truth, the American ideal, or any such nonsense.

They just killed. One by one. Their goal was to eliminate each and every Epic who thought himself or herself above the law.

And since that was pretty much *every* Epic, they had a lot of work to do.

I continued scanning windows. How would they try to kill Fortuity? There would only be a few ways to go about it. They might try to catch him in a situation impossible to escape. A precog's powers would lead him down the safest path of self-preservation, but if you set up a situation where *every* path led to death, you could kill him.

We call that a checkmate, but they're really hard to set up. More likely, the Reckoners knew Fortuity's weakness. Every Epic has at least one—an object, a state of mind, an action of some sort—that allows you to void their powers.

There, I thought, heart leaping as—through the scope—I spotted a dark figure huddled in a window on the third floor of a building across the street. I couldn't make out details, but he was probably tracking Fortuity with a rifle and scope of his own.

This was it. I smiled. I'd actually found them. After all of my practicing and searching, I'd *found* them.

I kept looking, even more eager. The sniper would just be one piece of the plot to kill the Epic. My hands began to sweat. Other people get excited by sporting events or action films, but I don't have time for prefabricated thrills. This, however … getting the chance to watch the Reckoners in action, seeing one of their traps firsthand … Well, it was literally the fulfillment of one of my grandest dreams, even if it was only the first step in my plans. I hadn't come just to watch an Epic be assassinated. Before the night's end, I intended to find a way to make the Reckoners let me join them.

"Fortuity!" yelled a nearby voice.

I quickly lowered my rifle, pulling back against the side of the alleyway. A figure ran past the opening a moment later. He was a stout man in a smoking jacket and slacks.

"Fortuity!" he yelled again. "Wait up!" I raised my weapon again, using the scope to inspect the newcomer. Was this part of the Reckoners' trap?

No. That was Donny "Curveball" Harrison, a minor Epic with only a single power, the ability to fire a handgun without ever running out of bullets. He was a bodyguard and hit man in Steelheart's organization. There was no way he was part of the Reckoners' plan—they didn't work with Epics. Ever. The

Reckoners hated the Epics. They only killed the worst of them, but they would *never* let one join their team.

Cursing softly to myself, I watched Curveball confront Fortuity and the woman. She looked concerned, full lips pursed, gorgeous eyes narrowed. Yes, she was worried. She was one of the Reckoners for certain.

Curveball started talking, explaining something, and Fortuity frowned. What was going on?

I turned my attention back to the woman. *There's something about her* …, I thought, my eyes lingering. She was younger than I'd originally thought, probably eighteen or nineteen, but something in those eyes made her *seem* much older.

Her look of concern was gone in a moment, replaced by what I realized was intentional vapidity as she turned to Fortuity and gestured onward. Whatever the trap was, she needed him to be farther down the street. That made sense. Trapping a precog is *tough*. If his danger senses got even a faint whiff of a trap, he'd bolt. She *had* to know his weakness, but probably didn't want to try to exploit it until they were more isolated.

Even then, it might not work. Fortuity would still be an armed man, and many Epic weaknesses were notoriously tricky to exploit.

I kept watching. Whatever Curveball's problem was, it didn't seem to have anything to do with the woman. He kept gesturing back toward the playhouse. If he convinced Fortuity to return …

The trap would never be sprung. The Reckoners would pull out, vanish, pick a new target. I could spend years searching for another chance like this one.

I couldn't let that happen. Taking a deep breath, I lowered my rifle and slung it over my shoulder. Then I stepped out onto the street and took off toward Fortuity.

It was time to hand the Reckoners my résumé.

2

I hustled down the dark street on a steel sidewalk, passing in and out of pockets of light.

I might have just decided to do something very, very stupid. Like eating-meat-sold-by-shady-understreet-vendors stupid. Maybe even stupider. The Reckoners planned their assassinations with extreme care. It hadn't been my intention to interfere—only to watch, then try to get them to take me on. By stepping out of that alleyway, I changed things. Interfered with the plan, whatever it was. There was a chance that everything was going just as it was supposed to—that Curveball was accounted for.

But maybe not. No plan was perfect, and even the Reckoners failed. Sometimes they pulled out, their target left alive. It was better to retreat than risk capture.

I didn't know which situation this was, but I had to at least try to help. If I missed this opportunity, I'd curse myself for years.

All three people—Fortuity, Curveball, and the beauty with the dangerous air—turned toward me as I ran up. "Donny!" I said. "We need you back at the Reeve!"

Curveball frowned at me, eyeing my rifle. He reached under his jacket for his gun, but didn't pull it out. Fortuity, in his red suit and deep red cape, raised an eyebrow at me. If I'd been a danger, his powers would have warned him. I wasn't planning to do anything to him in the next few minutes, though, so he got no warning.

"Who are *you*?" Curveball demanded.

I stopped. "Who am I? Sparks, Donny! I've worked for Spritzer for three years now. Would it *kill* you to try remembering

people's names once in a while?"

My heart was thumping, but I tried not to show it. Spritzer was the guy who ran the Reeve Playhouse. Spritz wasn't an Epic, but he was in Steelheart's pay—pretty much anyone with any influence in the city was.

Curveball studied me suspiciously, but I knew he didn't give much mind to the lowlife thugs around him. In fact, he probably would have been shocked by how much I knew about him, along with most of the Epics in Newcago.

"Well?" I demanded. "You coming?"

"You don't give lip to me, boy. What are you, a door guard?"

"I went on the Idolin raid last summer," I said, crossing my arms. "I'm moving up, Donny."

"You call me sir, idiot," Curveball snapped, lowering his hand from his jacket. "If you were 'moving up,' you wouldn't be running messages. What's this nonsense about going back? He said he needed Fortuity to run some odds for him."

I shrugged. "He didn't tell me *why;* he just sent me to get you. Said to say that he'd been wrong, and you weren't to bother Fortuity." I looked to Fortuity. "I don't think the Spritz knew about … er … that you had plans, sir." I nodded to the woman.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. I was so nervous, you could have scratched off a lottery ticket by holding it against my knuckles. Finally, Fortuity sniffed. "Tell Spritz that he's forgiven, this time. He should know better—I'm not his personal calculator." He turned, sticking out his elbow to the woman and walking away, obviously assuming that she'd jump at his whim.

As she turned to follow, she glanced at me, long lashes fluttering above deep blue eyes. I found myself smiling.

Then I realized that if I'd fooled Fortuity, I'd probably fooled her too. That meant she—and the Reckoners—now thought I was one of Steelheart's lackeys. They were always careful not to endanger civilians, but they had nothing at all against taking out a few hit men or thugs.

Aw, sparks, I thought. *I should have winked at her! Why didn't I wink at her?*

Would that have looked stupid? I'd never really practiced winking. Could you do it the wrong way, though? It was a simple thing.

"Something wrong with your eye?" Curveball asked.

“Er, got a lash in it,” I said. “Sir. Sorry. Um, we should get back.” The thought of the Reckoners setting off their trap in time to take out Curveball—and me—as a nice side effect suddenly made me very, very nervous.

I hurried down the sidewalk, splashing through some puddles. Rain didn’t evaporate quickly in the darkness, and with the steel ground, there wasn’t anywhere for it to go. The Diggers had created some drainage, along with pipes to circulate air in the understreets, but their eventual madness had disrupted those plans and they’d never finished.

Curveball followed me at a moderate speed. I slowed down, matching his pace, worried he might come up with a reason to go back for Fortuity.

“What’s your hurry, kid?” he growled.

In the distance, the woman and Fortuity had stopped beneath a streetlight, where they had taken to searching one another’s mouths with their tongues.

“Stop staring,” Curveball said, walking past. “He could gun us down without even looking and nobody would care.”

It was true. Fortuity was a powerful enough Epic that—so long as he didn’t interfere with one of Steelheart’s plans—he could do whatever he pleased. Curveball himself didn’t have that kind of immunity. You still had to be careful when you were at his level. Steelheart wouldn’t care if a minor Epic like Curveball got himself stabbed in the back.

I tore my eyes away and joined Curveball. He lit up a cigarette as he walked, a flash of light in the dark, followed by the coal-red sizzle of the tip hanging in the air before him. “Sparks, Spritz,” he said. “Could have sent one of you lackeys out after Fortuity in the first place. I hate looking like a slontze.”

“You know how Spritz is,” I said absently. “He figured that sending you would be less offensive to Fortuity, since you’re an Epic.”

“Suppose that’s right.” Curveball took a pull on his cigarette. “Whose team are you in?”

“Eddie Macano’s,” I said, naming one of the underlings in Spritz’s organization. I glanced over my shoulder. They were *still* going at it. “He was the one who made me run after you. Didn’t want to do it himself. Too busy trying to pick up one of those girls Fortuity left behind. Whatta slontze, eh?”

“Eddie Macano?” Curveball said, turning toward me. The red tip of his cigarette lit his perplexed face a scarlet orange. “He died in that skirmish with the underbloods two days back. I was there.…”

I froze. *Whoops*.

Curveball reached for his gun.

3

HANDGUNS have one distinct advantage over rifles—they're fast. I didn't even try to beat him to the draw. I ducked to the side, running as fast as I could toward an alleyway.

In the near distance, somebody screamed. *Fortuity*, I thought. *Did he see me run? But I'm not standing in the light, and he wasn't watching. This is something else. The trap must have—*

Curveball opened fire on me.

The thing about handguns is that they're blasted difficult to aim. Even trained, practiced professionals miss more often than they hit. And if you level the gun out in front of you sideways—like you think you're in some stupid action movie—you'll hit even *less* often.

That was exactly what Curveball did, flashes from the front of his gun lighting the darkness. A bullet hit the ground near me, spraying sparks as it ricocheted off the steel pavement. I skidded into an alleyway and pressed myself back against the wall, out of Curveball's direct line of sight.

Bullets continued to spray against the wall. I didn't dare look out, but I could hear Curveball cursing and yelling. I was too panicked to count shots. A magazine like his couldn't hold more than a dozen or so bullets—

Oh, right, I thought. *His Epic power*. The man could keep blasting away and never run out of bullets. Eventually he'd round the corner and get a direct shot.

Only one thing to do. I took a deep breath, letting my rifle slide off my shoulder and catching it with my hand. I dropped to one knee in the mouth of the alleyway, putting myself at risk, and

raised the rifle. The burning cigarette gave me a sight on Curveball's face.

A bullet hit the wall above me. I prepared to squeeze the trigger.

"Stop it, you slontze!" a voice called, interrupting Curveball. A figure moved between us in the dim light just as I fired. The shot missed. That was *Fortuity*.

I lowered my gun as another shot rang out from high above. The sniper. A bullet struck the ground nearby, almost hitting Fortuity—but he jerked sideways at just the right moment. His danger sense.

Fortuity ran awkwardly, and as he got closer to a lantern, I saw why. He was handcuffed. Still, he was escaping; whatever the Reckoners' plan was, it looked like it had fallen apart.

Curveball and I glanced at each other, then he took off following Fortuity, firing a few stray shots in my direction. Having infinite bullets didn't make him any better a shot, however, and they all went wide.

I climbed to my feet and looked the other direction, toward where the woman had been. Was she all right?

A loud *crack* sounded in the air, and Curveball screamed, dropping to the ground. I smiled, right until a second shot fired and a spray of sparks exploded from the wall beside me. I cursed, ducking back into my alleyway. A second later the woman in the sleek red dress spun into the alleyway, holding a tiny derringer pistol and pointing it directly at my face.

People firing handguns missed, on average, from over ten paces —but I wasn't sure of the statistics when the pistol was fifteen inches from your face. Probably not so good for the target.

"Wait!" I said, holding up my hands, letting my rifle fall in its strap on my shoulder. "I'm trying to help! Didn't you see Curveball firing at me?"

"Who do you work for?" the woman demanded.

"Havendark Factory," I said. "I used to drive a cab, though I—"

"Slontze," she said. Gun still trained on me, she raised her hand to her head, touching one finger to her ear. I could see an earring there that was probably tethered to her mobile. "Megan here. Tia. Blow it."

An explosion sounded nearby and I jumped. "What was that!"

"The Reeve Playhouse."

“You *blew up* the Reeve?” I said. “I thought the Reckoners didn’t hurt innocents!”

That froze her, gun still pointed at me. “How do you know who we are?”

“You’re hunting Epics. Who else would you be?”

“But—” She cut off, cursing softly, raising her finger again. “No time. Abraham. Where is the mark?”

I couldn’t hear the reply, but it obviously satisfied her. A few more explosions sounded in the distance.

She eyed me, but my hands were still raised, and she *must* have seen Curveball firing on me. She apparently decided I wasn’t a threat. She lowered her gun and hurriedly reached down, breaking the stiletto heels off her shoes. Then she grabbed the side of her dress and ripped it off.

I gaped.

I normally consider myself somewhat levelheaded, but it’s not every day that you find yourself in a darkened alleyway with a gorgeous woman who rips off most of her clothing. Underneath she wore a low-cut tank top and a pair of spandex biker shorts. I was pleased to note that the gun holster was, indeed, strapped to her right thigh. Her mobile was hooked to the outside of the sheath.

She tossed the dress aside—it had been designed to come off easily. Her arms were lean and firm, and the wide-eyed naivety she’d shown earlier was completely gone, replaced with a hard edge and a determined expression.

I took a step, and in a heartbeat her pistol was trained on my forehead again. I froze.

“Out of the alleyway,” she said, gesturing.

I nervously did as asked, walking back onto the street.

“On your knees, hands on head.”

“I don’t really—”

“Down!”

I got down on my knees, feeling stupid, raising my hands to my head.

“Hardman,” she said, finger to her ear. “If Knees here so much as *sneezes*, put a slug through his neck.”

“But—” I began.

She took off at a run down the street, moving much more quickly now that she’d removed the heels and the dress. That left

me alone. I felt like an idiot kneeling there, hairs on my neck prickling as I thought of the sniper who had his weapon trained on me.

How many agents did the Reckoners have here? I couldn't imagine them trying anything like this without at least two dozen. Another explosion shook the ground. Why the blasts? They'd alert Enforcement, Steelheart's soldiers. Lackeys and thugs were bad enough; Enforcement wielded advanced guns and the occasional armor unit—twelve-foot-tall robotic suits of power armor.

The next explosion was closer, just down the block. Something must have gone wrong in their original plan, otherwise Fortuity wouldn't have gotten away from the woman in red. Megan? Was that what she'd said her name was?

This was one of their contingency plans. But what were they trying to do?

A figure burst out of an alleyway nearby, almost making me jump. I held still, cursing that sniper, but I did turn my head slightly to look. The figure wore red, and still had handcuffs on. Fortuity.

The explosions, I realized. *They were to scare him back this way!*

He crossed the street, then turned to run in my direction. Megan—if that was really her name—burst from the same road he'd appeared out of. She turned this way, trying to chase him down, but behind her—in the distance—another group of figures rushed out from a different street.

They were four of Spritz's thugs, in suits and carrying submachine guns. They pointed at Megan.

I watched from the other side of the street as Megan and Fortuity passed me. The thugs were approaching from my right, and Megan and Fortuity were running to my left, all of us on the same darkened street.

Come on! I thought at the sniper up above. *She doesn't see them! They'll gun her down. Take them out!*

Nothing. The thugs leveled their guns. I felt sweat trickle down the back of my neck. Then, teeth clenched, I rolled to the side, whipping my rifle out and drawing a bead on one of them.

I took a deep breath, concentrated, and squeezed the trigger, fully expecting to be shot in the head from above.

4

A handgun is like a firecracker—unpredictable. Light a firecracker, toss it, and you never really know where it's going to land or the damage it's going to do. The same's true when you shoot a handgun.

An Uzi is even worse—it's like a string of firecrackers. Much more likely to hurt something, but still awkward and unruly.

A rifle is elegant. It's an extension of your will. Take aim, squeeze the trigger, make things happen. In the hands of an expert with stillness inside of him, there's nothing more deadly than a good rifle.

The first thug fell to my shot. I inched the gun to the side, then squeezed again. The second went down. The other two lowered their weapons, dodging.

Look. Squeeze. Three down. The last one was full-out running by the time I focused on him, and he managed to get behind cover. I hesitated, spine itching—waiting to feel the bullet from the sniper hit my back. It didn't come. Hardman, it appeared, had realized that I was a good guy.

I stood up hesitantly. It wasn't the first time I'd killed, unfortunately. It didn't happen often, but once or twice, I'd had to protect myself in the understreets. This was different, but I didn't have time to think about it.

I shoved those emotions aside, and not knowing what else to do, I turned to the left and took off at a dead run down the street after Fortuity and the Reckoner woman. The Epic cursed and weaved toward a side street. The streets were all empty. Our explosions and gunfire had caused anyone nearby to clear out—

this sort of thing wasn't uncommon in Newcago.

Megan dashed after Fortuity, and I was able to cut to the side and meet up with her. She glared at me as we barreled down the cross street, shoulder to shoulder, after the Epic.

"I told you to stay put, Knees!" she yelled.

"Good thing I ignored you! I just saved your life."

"That's why I haven't shot you. Get out of here."

I ignored her, aiming my rifle as I ran and taking a shot at the Epic. It went wide—it was too hard to run and fire at the same time. *He's fast!* I thought, annoyed.

"That's useless," the girl said. "You can't hit him."

"I can slow him down," I said, lowering the rifle, running past a pub with lights off and doors closed. A group of nervous patrons watched from one of the windows. "Dodging will throw him off balance."

"Not for long."

"We need to both fire at once," I said. "We can pin him between two bullets, so either way he dodges, he'll hit one of them. Checkmate."

"Are you insane?" she said, still running. "That would be near impossible."

She was right. "Well, let's use his weakness, then. I know you know what it is—otherwise you'd never have gotten those handcuffs on him."

"It won't help," she said, dodging around a lamppost.

"It worked for you. Tell me what it is. I'll use it."

"Slontze," she cursed at me. "His danger sense is weakened if he's attracted to you. So unless he finds you a *whole* lot prettier than I do, it's *not* going to help."

Oh, I thought. Well, that was a problem.

"We need to—" Megan began, but then cut off, raising her finger to her ear as we ran. "No! I can do this! I don't *care* how close they are!"

They're trying to get her to pull out, I realized. It wouldn't be long before Enforcement arrived.

Ahead of us an unfortunate driver, probably on the way to the club district, pulled around the corner. The car screeched to a halt, and Fortuity cut in front of it, heading to the right down another alleyway that would lead him toward more populated streets.

I got an idea.

"Take this," I said, tossing my rifle to Megan. I whipped out my extra magazine and tossed it to her as well. "Fire at him. Slow him down."

"What?" Megan demanded. "Who are you to give me—"

"Do it!" I said, skidding to a stop beside the car. I pulled open the passenger door. "Out," I said to the woman behind the wheel.

The bystander got out and scurried away, leaving the keys in the ignition. In a world full of Epics with the legal right to take any vehicle they want, few people ask questions. Steelheart is brutal with thieves who aren't Epics, so most would never try what I'd just done.

Outside the car, Megan cursed, then raised my rifle expertly and took a shot. She had good aim, and Fortuity—just a little ways down the alleyway—stumbled to the right, his danger sense prompting him to dodge out of the way. As I'd hoped, it slowed him considerably.

I gunned the engine. It was a nice sporty coupe, and it looked practically new. Pity, that.

I tore off down the street. I'd told Megan that I'd been a cabdriver. Which was true; I'd tried it a few months back, right after graduating from the Factory. I hadn't mentioned, however, that the job had lasted only one day; I'd proven terrible at it.

You never know how much you'll like something until you try it out. It had been one of my father's famous sayings. The cab company hadn't expected me to "try out" driving for the first time in one of their cars. But how else was a guy like me supposed to get behind a wheel? I was an orphan who had been owned by the Factory for most of my life. My type didn't exactly make big money, and the understreets don't have room for cars anyway.

Regardless, driving had proven a tad more difficult than I'd expected it to be. I screeched around the corner of the dark street, the gas pedal pressed to the floor, barely in control. I knocked down a stop sign and a street sign on my way, but I made it down the block in a matter of heartbeats and screeched around another corner. I hit a few trash cans as I went up over the curb, but managed to retain control as I turned and pulled the car to a stop facing south.

I was pointing it directly down the alleyway. Fortuity was still stumbling through it toward me, tripping on refuse and boxes as

Megan slowed him.

There was a pop, Fortuity dodged, and my windshield suddenly cracked—a bullet blasting through it about an inch from my head. My heart leaped. Megan was still shooting.

You know, David, I thought to myself. *You really need to start thinking your plans through a little more carefully*.

I slammed the pedal down, roaring into the alleyway. It was just barely wide enough for the car, and sparks flew up on the left side as I veered a hair too far in that direction, shearing off the side mirror.

The headlights shone on a figure in a red leisure suit, hands cuffed together, cape flapping behind him. He'd lost his hat while running. His eyes were wide. There was nowhere for him to go in either direction.

Checkmate.

Or so I thought. As I got close, Fortuity leaped into the air and slammed his feet into the front of my windshield with superhuman dexterity.

That utterly shocked me. Fortuity wasn't supposed to have any enhanced physical abilities. Of course, for a man like him—who avoided danger so easily—there may not have been many opportunities to display such things. Either way, his feet hit my windshield in an expert maneuver only someone with super reflexes could have managed. He pushed off and jumped backward, the windshield shattering into pebbled glass, using the momentum of the car to throw himself into a backflip.

I slammed on the brakes and blinked as the glass sprayed my face. The car screeched to a halt in a shower of sparks. Fortuity landed his flip with poise.

I shook my head, dazed. *Yeah, super reflexes*, a piece of my mind thought. *I should have realized. Perfect complement to a precog portfolio*. Fortuity was wise to keep the secret. Many a powerful Epic had realized that hiding one or two abilities gave them an edge when another Epic tried to kill them.

Fortuity ran forward. I could see him glaring at me, lips curling up in a sneer. He was a monster—I'd documented over a hundred murders tied to him. And from the look in his eyes, he intended to add my name to that list.

He leaped into the air, toward the hood of the car.

Crack! Crack!

Fortuity's chest exploded.

5

FORTUITY'S corpse slammed down onto the hood of the car. Megan stood behind him, my rifle in one hand—held at the hip—her pistol in the other hand. The car's headlights bathed her in light. "Sparks!" she cursed. "I can't believe that actually worked."

She fired both at once, I realized. *She checkmated him in the air with two shots*. It had probably only worked because he'd been jumping—in midair it would have been harder for him to jerk out of the way. But still, shooting like that was incredible. A gun in each hand, one of them a rifle?

Sparks, I thought, echoing her. We'd actually won.

Megan pulled Fortuity's body off the hood and checked for a pulse. "Dead," she said. Then she shot the body twice in the head. "And double dead, to be certain."

At that moment about a dozen of Spritz's thugs appeared at the end of the alleyway, sporting Uzis.

I swore, scrambling into the back seat of the car. Megan jumped onto the hood and slid through the shattered windshield, ducking down in the passenger seat as a hailstorm of bullets slammed into the vehicle.

I tried to open the back door—but, of course, the walls of the alleyway were too close. The back window shattered and puffs of stuffing flew from the seats as they were shredded by Uzi fire.

"Calamity!" I said. "Glad it's not *my* car."

Megan rolled her eyes at me, then pulled something out of her top. A small cylinder, like a lipstick case. She twisted the bottom, waited for a lull in the bullets, then lobbed it out the front window.

“What was that?” I yelled over the shots.

I was answered by an explosion that shook the car, blowing scraps of trash from the alleyway across us. The bullets stopped for a moment, and I could hear men crying out in pain. Megan—still toting my rifle—hopped over the torn-up seat and lithely slipped through the broken back window, then ran for it.

“Hey!” I said, crawling out after her, bits of safety glass falling from my clothing. I jumped to the ground and dashed to the end of the alleyway, cutting to the side just as the survivors from the explosion started firing again.

She can shoot like a dream and she carries tiny grenades in her top, a bit of my addled mind thought. *I think I might be in love*.

I heard a low rumbling over the gunfire, and an armored truck pulled around the corner ahead, roaring toward Megan. It was huge and green, imposing, with enormous headlights. And it looked an awful lot like …

“A garbage truck?” I asked, running up to join Megan.

A tough-looking black man rode in the passenger seat. He pushed open the door for Megan. “Who’s that?” the man asked, nodding to me. He spoke with a faint French accent.

“A slontze,” she said, tossing my rifle back to me. “But a useful one. He knows about us, but I don’t think he’s a threat.”

Not exactly a glowing recommendation, but good enough. I smiled as she climbed into the cab, pushing the man to the middle seat.

“Do we leave him?” asked the man with the French accent.

“No,” said the driver. I couldn’t make him out; he was just a shadow, but his voice was solid and resonant. “He comes with us.”

I smiled, eagerly stepping up into the truck. Could the driver be Hardman, the sniper? He’d seen how helpful I’d been. The people inside reluctantly made room for me. Megan slipped into the back seat of the crew cab beside a wiry man wearing a leather camouflage jacket and holding a very nice-looking sniper rifle. *He* was probably Hardman. To his other side was a middle-aged woman with shoulder-length red hair. She wore spectacles and business attire.

The garbage truck pulled away, moving faster than I’d have thought possible. Behind us a group of the thugs came out of the alley, firing on the truck. It didn’t do much good, though we

weren't out of danger quite yet. Overhead I heard the distinctive sound of Enforcement copters. There would probably be a few high-level Epics on the way too.

"Fortuity?" the driver asked. He was an older man, perhaps in his fifties, and wore a long, thin black coat. Oddly, he had a pair of goggles tucked into the breast pocket of the coat.

"Dead," Megan said from behind.

"What went wrong?" the driver asked.

"Hidden power," she said. "Super reflexes. I got him cuffed, but he slipped away."

"There was also that one," the guy in the camo jacket—I was pretty sure that was Hardman—said. "He came up in the middle of it all, caused a wee bit of trouble." He had a distinctive Southern accent.

"We'll talk about him later," the driver said, taking a corner at high speed.

My heart started to beat more quickly, and I glanced out the window, searching the sky for copters. It wouldn't be long before Enforcement was told what to look for, and the truck was rather conspicuous.

"We should have just shot Fortuity in the first place," said the man with the French accent. "Derringer to the chest."

"Wouldn't have worked, Abraham," the driver said. "His abilities were too strong—even attraction could only do so much. We needed to do something nonlethal first—trap him, then shoot him. Precogs are tough."

He had that part right, probably. Fortuity had possessed a *very* strong danger sense. Likely the plan had been for Megan to cuff him and maybe lock him to the lamppost. Then, when he was partially immobilized, she could have rammed her derringer into his chest and fired. If she'd tried that first, his power might have warned him. It would have depended on how attracted he was to her.

"I wasn't expecting him to be so strong," Megan said, sounding disappointed with herself as she pulled on a brown leather jacket and a pair of cargo pants. "I'm sorry, Prof. I shouldn't have let him get away from me."

Prof. Something about that name struck me.

"It's done," the driver—Prof—said, pulling the garbage truck to a jarring halt. "We ditch the machine. It's been compromised."

Prof opened the door and we piled out.

"I—" I began to say, planning to introduce myself. The older man they called Prof, however, shot me a menacing glare over the hood of the garbage truck. I cut myself short, choking on my words. Standing in the shadows, with his long jacket and that grizzled face, hair peppered with grey, that man looked *dangerous*.

The Reckoners pulled a few packs of equipment out of the back of the garbage truck, including a massive machine gun that Abraham now toted. They led me down a set of steps into the understreets. From there the team hustled through a set of twists and turns. I did a pretty good job keeping track of where we were going until they led me down a long flight of stairs, several levels deep, into the steel catacombs.

Smart people stayed away from the catacombs. The Diggers had gone mad before the tunnels were finished. The ceiling lights rarely worked, and the square-shaped tunnels through the steel changed size as you progressed.

The team was silent as they continued down the passages, turning up the lights on their mobiles, which most wore strapped to the fronts of their jackets. I'd wondered if the Reckoners would carry mobiles, and the fact that they wore them made me feel better about mine. I mean, *everyone* knew that the Knighthawk Foundry was neutral, and that mobile connections were completely secure. The Reckoners' using the network was just another indication that Knighthawk was reliable.

We walked for a time, the Reckoners moving quietly, carefully. Several times Hardman went ahead to scout; Abraham watched our rear with that wicked-looking machine gun of his. It was hard to keep my bearings—down in the steel catacombs it felt like a subway system that halfway through development had turned into a rat's maze.

There were choke points, tunnels that went nowhere, and unnatural angles. In some places electrical cords jutted from the walls like those creepy arteries you find in the middle of a chunk of chicken. In other places the steel walls weren't solid, but instead had patches of paneling that had been ripped into by people searching for something worth selling. Scrap metal, however, was worthless in Newcago. There was more than enough of *that* lying around.

We passed groups of teenagers with dark expressions standing beside burning trash cans. They seemed displeased to have their solace invaded, but nobody interfered with us. Perhaps it was due to Abraham's enormous gun. The thing had gravatonics glowing blue on the bottom to help him lift it.

We worked our way through those tunnels for over an hour. Occasionally we passed vents blowing air. The Diggers had gotten some things working down here, but most of it made no sense. Still, there was fresh air. Sometimes.

Prof led the way in that long black coat. *It's a lab coat,* I realized as we turned another corner. *One that's been dyed black*. He wore a black buttoned shirt beneath it.

The Reckoners were obviously worried about being followed, but I felt they overdid it. I was hopelessly lost after fifteen minutes, and Enforcement *never* came down to this level. There was an unspoken agreement. Steelheart ignored those living in the steel catacombs, and they didn't do anything to bring his judgment down upon them.

Of course … the Reckoners changed that truce. An important Epic had been assassinated. How would Steelheart react to that?

Eventually the Reckoners led me around a corner that looked like every other one—only this time it led to a small room cut into the steel. There were a lot of these places in the catacombs. Places where the Diggers had planned to put a restroom, a small shop, or a dwelling.

Hardman the sniper took up position at the door. He'd taken out a camo ball cap and put it on his head, and there was an unfamiliar emblem on the front. It looked like some kind of royal crest or something. The other four Reckoners arranged themselves facing me. Abraham got out a large flashlight and clicked a button that lit up the sides, turning it into a lantern. He set it on the floor.

Prof crossed his arms, his face emotionless, inspecting me. The woman with the red hair stood beside him. She seemed more thoughtful. Abraham still carried his large gun, and Megan took off her leather jacket and strapped on an underarm gun holster. I tried not to stare, but that was like trying not to blink. Only … well, kind of the opposite.

I took a hesitant step backward, realizing I was cornered. I'd begun to think that I was on my way toward being accepted into

their team. But looking into Prof's eyes, I realized that was *not* the case. He saw me as a threat. I hadn't been brought along because I'd been helpful; I'd been brought along because he hadn't wanted me wandering free.

I was a captive. And this deep in the steel catacombs, nobody would notice a scream or a gunshot.

6

“TEST him, Tia,” Prof said.

I shied back, holding my rifle nervously. Behind Prof, Megan leaned against a wall, jacket back on, handgun strapped under her arm. She spun something in her hand. The extra magazine for my rifle. She’d never returned it.

Megan smiled. She’d tossed my rifle back to me up above, but I had a sinking suspicion that she’d emptied the chamber, leaving the gun unloaded. I started to panic.

The redhead—Tia—approached me, holding some kind of device. It was flat and round, the size of a plate, but had a screen on one side. She pointed it at me. “No reading.”

“Blood test,” Prof said, face hard.

Tia nodded. “Don’t force us to hold you down,” she said to me, removing a strap from the side of the device; it was connected to the disc by cords. “This will prick you, but it won’t do you any harm.”

“What is it?” I demanded.

“A dowser.”

A dowser … a device that tested if one was an Epic or not. “I … thought those were just myths.”

Abraham smiled, enormous gun held beside him. He was lean and muscled and seemed very calm, as opposed to the tension displayed by Tia and even Prof. “Then you won’t mind, eh, my friend?” he asked with his French accent. “What does it matter if a *mythological* device pricks you?”

That didn’t comfort me, but the Reckoners were a group of practiced assassins who killed High Epics for a living. There

wasn't much I could do.

The woman wrapped my arm with a wide strap, a bit like what you use to measure blood pressure. Wires led from it to the device in her hand. There was a small box on the inside of the strap, and it pricked me.

Tia studied the screen. "He's clean for certain," she said, looking at Prof. "Nothing on the blood test either."

Prof nodded, seeming unsurprised. "All right, son. It's time for you to answer a few questions. Think very carefully before you reply."

"Okay," I said as Tia removed the strap. I rubbed my arm where I'd been pricked.

"How," Prof said, "did you find out where we were going to strike? Who told you that Fortuity was our target?"

"Nobody told me."

His expression grew dark. Beside him, Abraham raised an eyebrow and hefted his gun.

"No, really!" I said, sweating. "Okay, so I heard from some people on the street that you might be in town."

"We didn't tell anyone our mark," Abraham said. "Even if you knew we were here, how did you know the Epic we'd try to kill?"

"Well," I said, "who *else* would you hit?"

"There are thousands of Epics in the city, son," Prof said.

"Sure," I replied. "But most are beneath your notice. You target High Epics, and there are only a few hundred of those in Newcago. Among them, only a couple dozen have a prime invincibility—and you *always* pick someone with a prime invincibility.

"However, you also wouldn't go after anyone *too* powerful or *too* influential. You figure they'd be well protected. That rules out Nightwielder, Conflux, and Firefight—pretty much Steelheart's whole inner circle. It also rules out most of the burrow barons.

"That leaves about a dozen targets, and Fortuity was the worst of the lot. All Epics are murderers, but he'd killed the most innocents by a long shot. Plus, that twisted way he played with people's entrails is *exactly* the sort of atrocity the Reckoners would want to stop." I looked at them, nervous, then shrugged. "Like I said. Nobody had to tell me. It's obvious who you'd end up picking."

The small room grew silent.

“Ha!” said the sniper, who still stood by the doorway. “Lads and ladies, I think this means we might be getting a *tad* predictable.”

“What’s a prime invincibility?” Tia asked.

“Sorry,” I said, realizing they wouldn’t know my terms. “It’s what I call an Epic power that renders conventional methods of assassination useless. You know, regeneration, impervious skin, precognition, self-reincarnation, that kind of thing.” A High Epic was someone who had one of those. I’d never heard of one who had two, fortunately.

“Let us pretend,” Prof said, “that you really did figure it out on your own. That still doesn’t explain how you knew where we’d spring our trap.”

“Fortuity always sees the plays at Spritz’s place on the first Saturday of the month,” I said. “And he always goes to look for amusement afterward. It’s the only reliable time when you’d find him alone and in a mind-set where he could be baited into a trap.”

Prof glanced at Abraham, then at Tia. She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I think he’s telling the truth, Prof,” Megan said, her arms crossed, jacket open at the front. *Don’t … stare …*, I had to remind myself.

Prof looked at her. “Why?”

“It makes sense,” she said. “If Steelheart had known who we were going to hit, he’d have had something more elaborate planned for us than one boy with a rifle. Besides, Knees here *did* try to help. Kind of.”

“I helped! You’d be dead if it weren’t for me. Tell her, Hardman.”

The Reckoners looked confused.

“Who?” Abraham asked.

“Hardman,” I said, pointing at the sniper by the door.

“My name’s Cody, kid,” he said, amused.

“Then where’s Hardman?” I asked. “Megan told me he was up above, watching with his rifle to …” I trailed off.

There never was a sniper up above, I realized. *At least, not one specifically told to watch me*. Megan had just said that to make me stay put.

Abraham laughed deeply. “Got caught by the old invisible

sniper gag, eh? Had you kneeling there thinking you'd be shot any moment. Is that why she calls you Knees?"

I blushed.

"All right, son," Prof said. "I'm going to be nice to you and pretend none of this ever happened. Once we're out that door, I want you to count to a thousand really slowly. Then you can leave. If you try to follow us, I'll shoot you." He waved to the others.

"No, wait!" I said, reaching for him.

The other four each had a gun out in a flash, all pointed at my head.

I gulped, then lowered my hand. "Wait, please," I said a little more timidly. "I want to join you."

"You want to what?" Tia asked.

"Join you," I said. "That's why I came today. I didn't intend to get involved. I just wanted to apply."

"We don't exactly accept applications," Abraham said.

Prof studied me.

"He *was* somewhat helpful," Megan said. "And I … will admit that he is a decent shot. Maybe we should take him on, Prof."

Well, whatever else happened, I'd managed to impress her. That seemed almost as great a victory as taking down Fortuity.

Eventually Prof shook his head. "We aren't recruiting, son. Sorry. We're going to leave, and I don't want to *ever* see you anywhere near one of our operations again—I don't want to even get a hint of you being in the same town as us. Stay in Newcago. After today's mess, we won't be coming back here for a long while."

That seemed to settle it for all of them. Megan gave me a shrug, an almost apologetic one that seemed to indicate she'd said what she had as thanks for saving her from the thugs with the Uzis. The others gathered around Prof, joining him as he walked to the door.

I stood behind, feeling impotent and frustrated.

"You're failing," I said to them, my voice growing soft.

For some reason this made Prof hesitate. He glanced back at me, most of the others already out the door.

"You never go for the real targets," I said bitterly. "You always pick the safe ones, like Fortuity. Epics you can isolate and kill. Monsters, yes, but relatively unimportant ones. Never the *real*

monsters, the Epics who broke us and turned our nation to rubble."

"We do what we can," Prof said. "Getting ourselves killed trying to take out an invincible Epic wouldn't serve anyone."

"Killing men like Fortuity won't do much either," I said. "There are too many of them, and if you keep picking targets like him, nobody's going to worry about you. You're only an annoyance. You can't change the world that way."

"We're not trying to," Prof said. "We're just killing Epics."

"What would you have us do, lad?" Hardman—I mean, Cody—said, amused. "Take on Steelheart himself?"

"Yes," I said fervently, stepping forward. "You want to change things, you want to make them afraid? He's the one to attack! Show them that nobody's above our vengeance!"

Prof shook his head. He continued on his way, black lab coat rustling. "I made this decision years ago, son. We have to fight the battles we have a chance of winning."

He walked out into the hallway. I was left alone in the small room, the flashlight they'd left behind giving a cold glow to the steel chamber.

I had failed.

7

I stood in the still, quiet box of a room lit by the abandoned flashlight. It appeared to be running low on charge, but the steel walls reflected the dim light well.

No, I thought.

I strode from the room, heedless of the warnings. *Let them shoot me.*

Their retreating figures were backlit by their mobiles, a group of dark forms in the cramped hallway.

"Nobody else fights," I called after them. "Nobody else even tries! You're the only ones left. If even *you're* scared of men like Steelheart, then how can anyone ever think any differently?"

The Reckoners continued walking.

"Your work means something!" I yelled. "But it's not enough! So long as the most powerful of the Epics consider themselves immune, nothing will change. So long as you leave them alone, you're essentially *proving* what they've always said! That if an Epic is strong enough, he can take what he wants, do what he wants. You're saying they deserve to rule."

The group kept walking, though Prof—toward the rear—seemed to hesitate. It was only for a moment.

I took a deep breath. There was only one thing left to try. "I've seen Steelheart bleed."

Prof stiffened.

That made the others pause. Prof looked over his shoulder at me. *"What?"*

"I've seen Steelheart bleed."

"Impossible," Abraham said. "The man is perfectly

impervious."

"I've seen it," I said, heart thumping, face sweating. I'd never told anyone. The secret was too dangerous. If Steelheart knew that someone had survived the bank attack that day, he'd hunt me down. There would be no hiding, no running. Not if he thought I knew his weakness.

I didn't, not completely. But I had a clue, perhaps the only one anyone had.

"Making up lies won't get you on our team, son," Prof said slowly.

"I'm not lying," I said, meeting his eyes. "Not about this. Give me a few minutes to tell my story. At least listen."

"This is foolishness," Tia said, taking hold of Prof's arm. "Prof, let's go."

Prof didn't respond. He studied me, eyes searching my own, as if looking for something. I felt strangely exposed before him, naked. As if he could see my every wish and sin.

He walked slowly back to me. "All right, son," he said. "You've got fifteen minutes." He gestured back toward the room. "I'll listen to what you have to say."

We walked back into the small room amid a few grumbles from some of the others. I was beginning to place the members of the team. Abraham, with his large machine gun and beefy arms—he had to be the heavy-weapons man. He'd be around to lay down cover at Enforcement officers if something went wrong. He'd intimidate information out of people when needed, and would probably work the heavy machinery if the plan called for it.

Red-haired Tia, narrow-faced and articulate, was probably the team's scholar. Judging from her clothes, she wouldn't be involved in confrontations, and the Reckoners needed people like her—someone who knew exactly how Epic powers worked, and who could help decipher their targets' weaknesses.

Megan had to be point woman. She would be the one who went into danger, who moved the Epic into position. Cody, with his camo and sniper rifle, was most likely fire support. I was guessing that after Megan neutralized the Epic's powers in some way, Cody would pick them off or checkmate them with precision fire.

Which left Prof. Team leader, I supposed. Maybe a second point man, if they needed one? I hadn't quite placed him yet, though

something itched at me regarding his name.

As we entered the room again, Abraham looked interested in what I was going to say. On the other hand, Tia looked annoyed, and Cody actually looked amused. The sniper leaned back against the wall and relaxed, crossing his arms to watch the hallway. The rest of them surrounded me, waiting.

I smiled at Megan, but her face had become impassive. Cold, even. What had changed?

I took a deep breath. “I’ve seen Steelheart bleed,” I repeated. “It happened ten years ago, when I was eight. My father and I were at the First Union Bank on Adams Street.…”

I fell silent, story finished, my last words hanging in the air. *And I intend to see him bleed again*. It sounded like bravado to me now, standing before a group of people who had dedicated their lives to killing Epics.

My nervousness had evaporated while telling the story. It felt oddly relaxing to finally share it, giving voice to those terrible events. At last, someone else knew. If I were to die, there would be others who had the information I alone had carried. Even if the Reckoners decided not to go after Steelheart, the knowledge would exist, perhaps to be used someday. Assuming they believed me.

“Let’s sit,” Prof finally said, settling down. The others joined him, Tia and Megan reluctantly, but Abraham was still relaxed. Cody remained standing by the door, keeping guard.

I sat down, setting my rifle across my lap. I had the safety on, even though I was pretty sure it wasn’t loaded.

“Well?” Prof asked of his team.

“I’ve heard of it,” Tia admitted grudgingly. “Steelheart destroyed the bank on the Day of Annexation. The bank rented out some of the offices on the upper floor—nothing too important, some assessors and bookkeepers who did government work. Most lorists I’ve talked to assume that Steelheart hit the building because of those offices.”

“Yes,” Abraham agreed. “He attacked many city buildings that day.”

Prof nodded thoughtfully.

“Sir—” I began.

He cut me off. “You’ve had your say, son. It’s a show of respect that we’re talking about this where you can hear. Don’t make me regret it.”

“Er, yes sir.”

“I *have* always wondered why he attacked the bank first,” Abraham continued.

“Yeah,” Cody said from the doorway. “It was an odd choice. Why take out a bunch of accountants, *then* move on to the mayor?”

“But this is not a good enough reason to change our plans,” Abraham added, shaking his head. He nodded to me, enormous gun over his shoulder. “I’m sure you’re a wonderful person, my friend, but I do not think we should base decisions on information given by someone we only just met.”

“Megan?” Prof asked. “What do you think?”

I glanced at her. Megan sat a little apart from the others. Prof and Tia seemed the most senior of this particular cell of the Reckoners. Abraham and Cody often chimed in their thoughts, as close friends would. But what of Megan?

“I think this is stupid,” she said, her voice cold.

I frowned. *But … just a few minutes ago, she was the friendliest toward me!*

“You stood up for him before,” Abraham said, as if voicing my own thoughts.

That made her scowl. “That was before I heard this wild story. He’s lying, trying to get onto our team.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but a glance from Prof made me bite off the comment.

“You sound like you’re considering it,” Cody said to Prof.

“Prof?” Tia said. “I know that look. Remember what happened with Duskwatch.”

“I remember,” he said. He studied me further.

“What?” Tia asked.

“He knows about the rescue workers,” Prof said.

“The rescue workers?” Cody asked.

“Steelheart covered up that he killed the rescue workers,” Prof said softly. “Few know of what he did to them and the survivors —of what happened at the First Union building. He didn’t kill anyone who went to help at other city buildings he’d destroyed. He only killed the rescue workers at First Union.

“Something *is* different about his destruction of the bank,” Prof continued. “We know he entered that one, and spoke to the people inside. He didn’t do that elsewhere. They say he came out of First Union enraged. Something happened inside. I’ve known that for a while. The other cell leaders know it as well. We assumed that whatever made him angry had to do with Deathpoint.” Prof sat with one hand on his knee, and he tapped his finger in thought, studying me. “Steelheart got his scar that day. Nobody knows how.”

“I do,” I said.

“Perhaps,” Prof said.

“Perhaps,” Megan said. “Perhaps not. Prof, he could have heard of the murders and known of Steelheart’s scar, then fabricated the rest! There’d be no way to prove it, because if he’s right, then he and Steelheart are the only witnesses.”

Prof nodded slowly.

“Hitting Steelheart would be near impossible,” Abraham said. “Even if we *could* figure out his weakness, he’s got guards. Strong ones.”

“Firefight, Conflux, and Nightwielder,” I said, nodding. “I’ve got a plan for dealing with each of them. I think I’ve figured out their weaknesses.”

Tia frowned. “You have?”

“Ten years,” I said softly. “For ten years, all I’ve done is plan how to get to him.”

Prof still seemed thoughtful. “Son,” he said to me. “What did you say your name was?”

“David.”

“Well, David. You guessed we were going to hit Fortuity. What would you guess we’d do next?”

“You’ll leave Newcago by nightfall,” I said immediately. “That’s always what a team does after springing a trap. Of course, there *is* no nightfall here. But you’ll be gone in a few hours, then go rejoin the rest of the Reckoners.”

“And what would be the next Epic we’d be planning to hit?” Prof asked.

“Well,” I said, thinking quickly, remembering my lists and projections. “None of your teams have been active in the Middle Grasslands or Caliph lately. I’d guess your next target would be either the Armsman in Omaha, or Lightning, one of the Epics in

Snowfall's band out in Sacramento."

Cody whistled softly. Apparently I'd guessed pretty well—which was fortunate. I hadn't been too sure. I tended to be right about a quarter of the time lately, guessing where Reckoner cells would strike.

Prof suddenly moved to stand. "Abraham, prep Hole Fourteen. Cody, see if you can get a false trail set up that will lead to Caliph."

"Hole Fourteen?" Tia said. "We're staying in the city?"

"Yes," Prof said.

"Jon," Tia said, addressing Prof. His real name, probably. "I can't—"

"I'm not saying that we're going to hit Steelheart," he said, holding up a hand. He pointed at me. "But if the kid has figured out what we're going to do next, someone else might have too. That means we need to change. Immediately. We'll go to ground here for a few days." He looked at me. "As for Steelheart … we'll see. First I want to hear your story again. I want to hear it a dozen times. Then I'll decide what to do next."

He held out a hand to me. I took it hesitantly, letting him pull me to my feet. There was something in this man's eyes, something I didn't expect to see. A hatred of Steelheart nearly as deep as my own. It was manifest in the way he said the Epic's name, the way his lips turned down, the way his eyes narrowed and seemed to *burn* as he spoke the word.

It seemed like the two of us understood each other in that moment.

Prof, I thought. *Professor, PhD. The man who founded the Reckoners is named Jonathan Phaedrus. P-h … d.*

This wasn't just a team commander, a chief of one of the Reckoner cells. This was Jon Phaedrus himself. Their leader and founder.

8

“SO …,” I said as we left the room. “Where’s this place we’re going? Hole Fourteen?”

“You don’t need to know that,” Prof said.

“Can I have my rifle magazine back?”

“No.”

“Do I need to know any … I don’t know. Secret handshakes? Special identifiers? Codes so other Reckoners know I’m one of them?”

“Son,” Prof said, “you’re *not* one of us.”

“I know, I know,” I said quickly. “But I don’t want anyone to surprise us and think I’m an enemy or something, and—”

“Megan,” Prof said, jerking his thumb at me. “Entertain the kid. I need to think.” He walked on ahead, joining Tia, and the two of them began speaking quietly.

Megan gave me a scowl. I probably deserved it, for yammering questions at Prof like that. I was just so nervous. Phaedrus himself, the founder of the Reckoners. Now that I knew what to look for, I recognized him from the descriptions—sparse though they were—that I’d read.

The man was a legend. A god among freedom fighters and assassins alike. I was starstruck, and the questions had just dribbled out. In truth I was proud of myself for not asking for an autograph on my gun.

My behavior hadn’t earned me points with Megan, however, and she obviously didn’t like being put on babysitting detail either. Cody and Abraham were talking ahead, which left Megan and me walking beside each other as we moved at a brisk pace

down one of the darkened steel tunnels. She was silent.

She really was pretty. And she was probably around my age, maybe just a year or two older. I still wasn't certain why she'd turned cold toward me. Maybe some witty conversation would help with that. "So, uh," I said. "How long have you … you know, been with the Reckoners? And all?"

Smooth.

"Long enough," she said.

"Were you involved in any of the recent kills? Gyro? Shadowblight? Earless?"

"Maybe. I doubt Prof would want me sharing specifics."

We walked in silence for a time longer.

"You know," I said, "you're not really very entertaining."

"What?"

"Prof told you to entertain me," I said.

"That was just to deflect your questions onto someone else. I doubt you'll find anything I do to be particularly entertaining."

"I wouldn't say that," I said. "I liked the striptease."

She glared at me. *"What?"*

"Out in the alley," I said. "When you …"

Her expression was so frigid you could have used it to liquidcool a high-fire-rate stationary gun barrel. Or maybe some drinks. Chill drinks—that was a better metaphor.

I didn't think she'd appreciate me using it right then, though. "Never mind," I said.

"Good," she said, turning away from me and continuing on.

I breathed out, then chuckled. "For a moment there I thought you'd shoot me."

"I only shoot people when the job calls for it," she said. "You're trying to make small talk; you're simply not very good at it. That's not a shooting offense."

"Er, thanks."

She nodded, businesslike, which wasn't exactly the reaction I'd have hoped for from a pretty girl whose life I'd saved. Granted, she was the first girl—pretty or not—whose life I'd saved, so I didn't have much of a baseline.

Still, she'd been kind of warm to me before, hadn't she? Maybe I just needed to work a little harder. "So what *can* you tell me?" I asked. "About the team, or the other members."

"I'd prefer to discuss another topic," she said. "One that doesn't

involve secrets about the Reckoners *or* my clothing, please."

I fell silent. Truth was, I didn't *know* about much other than the Reckoners and the Epics in town. Yes, I'd had some schooling at the Factory, but only basic kinds of stuff. And before that I'd lived a year scavenging on the streets, malnourished, barely avoiding death.

"I guess we could talk about the city," I said. "I know a lot about the understreets."

"How old are you?" Megan said.

"Eighteen," I said, defensive.

"And is anyone going to come looking for you? Are people going to wonder where you went?"

I shook my head. "I hit my majority two months ago. Got kicked out of the Factory where I worked."

That was the rule. You only worked there until you were eighteen; after that you found another job.

"You worked at a factory?" she asked. "For how long?"

"Nine years or so," I said. "Weapons factory, actually. Made guns for Enforcement." Some understreeters, particularly the older ones, grumbled about how the Factory exploited children for labor. That was a stupid complaint, made by old people who remembered a different world. A safer world.

In my world, people who gave you the chance to work in exchange for food were saints. Martha saw to it that her workers were fed, clothed, and protected, even from one another.

"Was it nice?"

"Kind of. It's not slave labor, like people think. We got paid." Kind of. Martha saved wages to give us when we were no longer owned by the Factory. Enough to establish ourselves, find a trade.

"It was a good place to grow up, all things considered," I said wistfully as we walked. "Without the Factory, I doubt I'd have ever learned to fire a gun. The kids aren't supposed to use the weapons, but if you're good, Martha—she ran the place—turns a blind eye." More than one of her kids had gone on to work for Enforcement.

"That's interesting," Megan said. "Tell me more."

"Well, it's …" I trailed off, looking at her. Only now did I realize she'd been walking along, eyes forward, barely paying attention. She was just asking things to keep me talking, maybe even to keep me from bothering her in more invasive ways.

"You're not even listening," I accused.

"You seemed like you wanted to talk," she said curtly. "I gave you the chance."

Sparks, I thought, feeling like a slontze. We fell silent as we walked, which seemed to suit Megan just fine.

"You don't know how aggravating this is," I finally said.

She gave me a glance, her emotions hidden. "Aggravating?"

"Yes, aggravating. I've spent the last ten years of my life studying the Reckoners and the Epics. Now that I'm with you, I'm told I'm not allowed to ask questions about important things. It's aggravating."

"Think about something else."

"There *is* nothing else. Not to me."

"Girls."

"None."

"Hobbies."

"None. Just you guys, Steelheart, and my notes."

"Wait," she said. "Notes?"

"Sure," I said. "I worked in the Factory during the days, always listening for rumors. I spent my free days spending what little money I had buying newspapers or stories off those who traveled abroad. I got to know a few information brokers. Each night I'd work on the notes, putting it all together. I knew I'd need to be an expert on Epics, so I became one."

She frowned deeply.

"I know," I said, grimacing. "It sounds like I don't have a life. You're not the first to tell me that. The others at the Factory—"

"Hush," she said. "You wrote about Epics, but what about us? What about the Reckoners?"

"Of course I wrote it down," I said. "What was I supposed to do? Keep it in my head? I filled a couple notebooks, and though most of it was guesswork, I'm pretty good at guessing…." I trailed off, realizing why she looked so worried.

"Where is it all?" she asked softly.

"In my flat," I said. "Should be safe. I mean, none of those goons got close enough to see me clearly."

"And the woman you pulled out of her car?"

I hesitated. "Yeah, she saw my face. She *might* be able to describe me. But, I mean, that wouldn't be enough for them to track me, right?"

Megan was silent.

Yes, I thought. *Yes, it might be enough*. Enforcement was very good at its job. And unfortunately, I had a few incidents in my past, such as the taxi wreck. I was on file, and Steelheart would give Enforcement a great deal of motivation to follow every lead regarding Fortuity's death.

"We need to talk to Prof," Megan said, towing me by the arm toward where the others were walking ahead.

9

PROF listened to my explanation with thoughtful eyes. “Yes,” he said as I finished. “I should have seen this. It makes sense.”

I relaxed. I’d been afraid he’d be furious.

“What’s the address, son?” Prof asked.

“Fifteen thirty-two Ditko Place,” I said. It was carved into the steel around a park in one of the nicer areas of the understreets. “It’s small, but I live alone. I keep it locked tight.”

“Enforcement won’t need a key,” Prof said. “Cody, Abraham, go to this place. Set a firebomb, make sure nobody is inside, and blow the entire room.”

I felt a sudden jolt of alarm, as if someone had hooked up my toes to a car battery. *“What?”*

“We can’t have Steelheart getting that information, son,” Prof said. “Not just the information about us, but the information on the other Epics you collected. If it’s as detailed as you say, he could use it against the other powerful Epics in the region. Steelheart already has too much influence. We need to destroy that intel.”

“You can’t!” I exclaimed, my voice echoing in the narrow, steel-walled tunnel. Those notes were my life’s work! Sure, I hadn’t been around *that* long, but still … ten years of effort? Losing it would be like losing a hand. Given the option, I’d rather lose the hand.

“Son,” Prof said, “don’t push me. Your place here is fragile.”

“You *need* that information,” I said. “It’s important, sir. Why would you burn hundreds of pages of information about the powers of Epics and their possible weaknesses?”

"You said you gathered it through hearsay," Tia said, her arms crossed. "I doubt there's anything in it that we don't know already."

"Do you know Nightwielder's weakness?" I asked, desperate.

Nightwielder. He was one of Steelheart's High Epic bodyguards, and his powers created the perpetual darkness over Newcago. He was a shadowy figure himself, completely incorporeal, immune to gunfire or weapons of any kind.

"No," Tia admitted. "And I doubt you do either."

"Sunlight," I said. "He becomes solid in sunlight. I've got pictures."

"You have *pictures* of Nightwielder in corporeal form?" Tia asked.

"I think so. The person I bought them from wasn't certain, but I'm reasonably sure."

"Hey, lad," Cody called. "You want to buy Loch Ness from me? I'll give you a good price."

I glared at him, and he just shrugged. Loch Ness was in Scotland, I knew that much, and it seemed that the crest on Cody's cap might be some kind of Scottish or English deal. But his accent didn't match.

"Prof," I said, turning back to him. "Phaedrus, sir, please. You have to see my plan."

"Your plan?" He didn't seem surprised that I'd worked out his name.

"For killing Steelheart."

"You have a plan?" Prof asked. "For killing the most powerful Epic in the country?"

"That's what I told you before."

"I thought you wanted to join us to get us to do it."

"I need help," I said. "But I didn't come empty-handed. I've got a detailed plan. I think it will work."

Prof just shook his head, looking bemused.

Suddenly, Abraham laughed. "I like him. He has … something. *Un homme téméraire*. You sure we aren't recruiting, Prof?"

"Yes," Prof said flatly.

"At least look at my plan before you burn it," I said. "Please."

"Jon," Tia said. "I'd like to see these pictures. They're likely fake, but even so …"

"Fine," Prof said, tossing something to me. The magazine for

my rifle. “Change of plans. Cody, you take Megan and the boy and go to his place. If Enforcement is there and looks like they’re going to take this information, destroy it. But if the site looks safe, bring it back.” He eyed me. “Whatever you can’t carry easily, destroy. Understood?”

“Sure,” Cody said.

“Thank you,” I said.

“It’s not a favor, son,” Prof said. “And I hope it’s not a mistake either. Go on. We may not have much time before they track you.”

It was getting quiet in the understreets by the time we neared Ditko Place. You’d think that, with the perpetual darkness, there wouldn’t really be a “day” or a “night” in Newcago, but there is. People tend to want to sleep when everyone else sleeps, so we settle into routines.

Of course, there are a minority who don’t like to do as told, even when it comes to something simple. I was one of those. Being up all night means being awake when everyone else is sleeping. It’s quieter, more private.

The ceiling lights were set to a clock somewhere, and they colored to deeper shades when it was night. The change was subtle, but we learned to notice it. So, even though Ditko Place was near the surface, there wasn’t much motion on the streets. People were sleeping.

We arrived at the park, a large underground chamber carved from the steel. It had numerous holes in the ceiling for fresh air, and blue-violet lights shone from spotlights around the rim. The center of the tall chamber was cluttered with rocks brought in from outside—real rocks, not ones that had been turned to steel. There was also wooden playground equipment, moderately well maintained, that had been scavenged from somewhere. In the daytime the place would fill with children—the ones too young to work, or the ones with families who could afford not to have them work. Old women and men would gather to knit socks or do other simple work.

Megan raised her hand to still us. “Mobiles?” she whispered.

Cody sniffed. “Do I look like some amateur?” he asked. “It’s on silent.”

I hesitated, then took mine off the place on my shoulder and double-checked. Fortunately it was on silent. I took out the battery anyway, just in case. Megan moved quietly out of the tunnel and across the park toward the shadow of a large rock. Cody went next, then I followed, keeping low and moving as quietly as I could, passing large stones growing lichen.

Up above a few cars rumbled by on the roadway that ran past the openings in the ceiling. Late-night commuters heading home. Sometimes they'd throw trash down on us. A surprising number of the rich still had ordinary jobs. Accountants, teachers, salesmen, computer technicians—though Steelheart's datanet was open only to his most trusted. I'd never seen a real computer, just my mobile.

It was a different world above, and jobs that had once been common were now held by only the privileged. The rest of us worked factories or sewed clothing in the park while watching children play.

I reached the rock and crouched beside Cody and Megan, who were stealthily inspecting the two far walls of the chamber, where the dwellings were cut. Dozens of holes in the steel provided homes of various sizes. Metal fire escapes had been harvested from unused buildings above and set up here to give access to the holes.

"So, which one is it?" Cody asked.

I pointed. "See that door on the second level, far right? That's it."

"Nice," Cody said. "How'd y'all afford a place like this?" He asked it casually, but I could tell that he was suspicious. They all were. Well, I suppose that was to be expected.

"I needed a room by myself for my research," I said. "The factory where I worked saves all of your wages when you're a kid, then gives them to you in four yearly chunks when you hit eighteen. It was enough to get me a year in my own room."

"Cool," Cody said. I wondered if my explanation passed his test or not. "It doesn't look like Enforcement has made it here yet. Maybe they couldn't match you from the description."

I nodded slowly, though beside me Megan was looking around, her eyes narrowed.

"What?" I asked.

"It looks too easy. I don't trust things that look too easy."

I scanned the far walls. There were a few empty trash bins and some motorbikes chained up beside a stairwell. Some chunks of metal had been etched by enterprising street artists. They weren't supposed to do that, but the people encouraged them, quietly. It was one of the only forms of rebellion the common people ever engaged in.

"Well, we can wait here staring until they *do* come," Cody said, rubbing his face with a leathery finger, "or we can just go. Let's be on with it." He stood up.

One of the large trash bins shimmered.

"Wait!" I said, grabbing Cody and pulling him down, my heart leaping.

"What?" he said, anxious, unslinging his rifle. It was of a very fine make, old but well maintained, with a large scope and a state-of-the-art suppressor on the front. I'd never been able to get my hands on one of those. The cheaper ones worked poorly, and I found it too hard to aim with them.

"There," I said, pointing at the trash bin. "Watch it."

He frowned but did what I asked. My mind raced, sorting through fragments of remembered research. I needed my notes. Shimmering … illusionist Epic … who was that?

Refractionary, I thought, seizing on a name. *A class C illusionist with personal invisibility capabilities*.

"What am I watching for?" Cody asked. "Did you get spooked by a cat or something—" He cut off as the bin shimmered again. Cody frowned, then crouched down farther. "What is that?"

"An Epic," Megan said, her eyes narrowing. "Some of the lesser Epics with illusion powers have trouble maintaining an exact illusion."

"Her name is Refractionary," I said softly. "She's pretty skilled, capable of creating complex visual manifestations. But she's not terribly powerful, and her illusions always have tells to them. Usually they shimmer as if light is reflecting off them."

Cody aimed his rifle, sighting on the trash bin. "So you're saying that bin isn't really there. It's hiding something else. Enforcement officers, probably?"

"I'd guess so," I said.

"Can she be harmed by bullets, lad?" Cody asked.

"Yes, she's not a High Epic. But Cody, she might not be in there."

“You just said—”

“She’s a class C illusionist,” I explained. “But her secondary power is class B personal invisibility. Illusions and invisibility often go hand in hand. Anyway, she can make herself invisible, but not anything else—others, she has to create an illusion around. I’d be certain she’s hiding an Enforcement squad in that fake trash bin illusion, but if she’s smart—and she is—she’ll be somewhere else.”

I felt an itch in the small of my back. I *hated* illusionist Epics. You never knew where they’d be. Even the weakest of them—class D or E, by my own notation system—could make an illusion big enough for themselves to hide in. If they had personal invisibility, it was even worse.

“There,” Megan whispered, pointing toward a large piece of playground equipment—a kind of wooden fort for climbing. “See those boxes on the top of that playground tower? They just shimmered. Someone’s hiding in them.”

“That’s only big enough for one person,” I whispered. “From that position, whoever is there could see right into my apartment through the door. Sniper?”

“Most likely,” Megan said.

“Refractionary is close, then,” I said. “She’ll need to be able to see both that playground equipment and the fake garbage bins to keep the illusions going. The range on her powers isn’t great.”

“How do we draw her out?” Megan asked.

“She likes to be involved, from what I remember,” I said. “If we can get the Enforcement soldiers to move, she’ll stay close to them, in case she needs to give orders or make illusions to support them.”

“Sparks!” Cody whispered. “How do you know all of this, lad?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Megan asked softly. “This is what he does. It’s what he has built his life around. He studies them.”

Cody stroked his chin. He looked as if he’d assumed everything I said before was bravado. “You know her weakness?”

“It’s in my notes,” I said. “I’m trying to remember. Uh … well, illusionists usually can’t see if they turn themselves completely invisible. They need light to strike their irises. So you can watch for the eyes. But a really skilled illusionist can make their eyes match the color of their surroundings. But that’s not really her weakness, more a limitation of illusions themselves.”

What was it? “Smoke!” I exclaimed, then blushed at the sound of it. Megan shot me a glare. “It’s her weakness,” I whispered. “She always avoids people who are smoking, and stays away from any kind of fire. It’s pretty well known, and reasonably substantiated, as far as Epic weaknesses go.”

“Guess we’re back to starting the place on fire after all,” Cody said. He seemed excited by the prospect.

“What? No.”

“Prof said—”

“We can still get the information,” I said. “They’re waiting for me, but they only sent a minor Epic. That means they want me, but they haven’t sorted through that the Reckoners were behind the assassination tonight—or maybe they don’t know how I was involved. They probably haven’t cleaned out my room yet, even if they did break in and scan through what’s there.”

“Excellent reason to burn the place,” Megan said. “I’m sorry, but if they’re that close …”

“But see, it’s essential that we go in now,” I said, growing more anxious. “We have to see what has been disturbed, if anything. That’ll tell us what they’ve discovered. We burn the place down now, and we blind ourselves.”

The other two hesitated.

“We can stop them,” I said. “And we might be able to kill us an Epic in the process. Refractionary has plenty of blood on her hands. Just last month someone cut her off in traffic. She created an illusion of the road turning up ahead and drove the offender off the freeway and into a home. Six dead. Children were in the car.”

Epics had a distinct, even incredible, lack of morals or conscience. That bothered some people, on a philosophical level. Theorists, scholars. They wondered at the sheer inhumanity many Epics manifested. Did the Epics kill because Calamity chose—for whatever reason—only terrible people to gain powers? Or did they kill because such amazing power twisted a person, made them irresponsible?

There were no conclusive answers. I didn’t care; I wasn’t a scholar. Yes, I did research, but so did a sports fan when he followed his team. It didn’t matter to me why the Epics did what they did any more than a baseball fan wondered at the physics of a bat hitting a ball.

Only one thing mattered—Epics gave no thought for ordinary human life. A brutal murder was a fitting retribution, in their minds, for the most minor of infractions.

"Prof didn't approve hitting an Epic," Megan said. "This isn't in the procedures."

Cody chuckled. "Killing an Epic is always in the procedures, lass. You just haven't been with us long enough to understand."

"I have a smoke grenade in my room," I said.

"What?" Megan asked. "How?"

"I grew up working at a munitions plant," I said. "We mostly made rifles and handguns, but we worked with other factories. I got to pick up the occasional goody from the QC reject pile."

"A smoke grenade is a goody?" Cody asked.

I frowned. What did he mean? Of course it was. Who wouldn't want a smoke grenade when offered one? Megan actually showed the faintest of smiles. She understood.

I don't get you, girl, I thought. She carried explosives in her shirt and was an excellent shot, but she was worried about procedures when she got a chance to kill an Epic? And as soon as she caught me looking at her, her expression grew cold and aloof once again.

Had I done something to offend her?

"If we can get that grenade, I can use it to negate Refractionary's powers," I said. "She likes to stay near her teams. So if we can draw the soldiers into an enclosed space, she'll probably follow. I can blow the grenade, then shoot her when it makes her appear."

"Good enough," Cody said. "But how are we going to manage all of that *and* get your notes?"

"Easy," I said, reluctantly handing my rifle to Megan. I'd have a better chance of fooling them if I wasn't armed. "We give them the thing they're waiting for. Me."

10

I crossed the street toward my flat, hands in the pockets of my jacket, fingering the roll of industrial tape I usually kept there. The other two hadn't liked my plan, but they hadn't come up with anything better. Hopefully they'd be able to fulfill their parts in it.

I felt completely naked without my rifle. I had a couple of handguns stashed in my room, but a man wasn't really dangerous unless he had a rifle. At least, he wasn't consistently dangerous. Hitting something with a handgun always felt like an accident.

Megan did it, I thought. *She not only hit, but hit a High Epic in the middle of a dodge, firing two guns at once, one from the hip*.

She'd shown emotion during our fight with Fortuity. Passion, anger, annoyance. The second two toward me, but it had been something. And then, for a few moments after he fell … there had been a connection. Satisfaction, and appreciation of me that had come out when she'd spoken on my behalf to Prof.

Now that was gone. What did it mean?

I stopped at the edge of the playground. Was I really thinking about a girl now? I was only about five paces from where a group of Enforcement officers were hiding, probably with automatic or energy weapons trained on me.

Idiot, I thought, heading up the metal stairway toward my apartment. They'd wait to see if I got out anything incriminating before grabbing me. Hopefully.

Climbing steps like that, with my back to the enemy, was excruciating. I did what I always did when I grew afraid. I thought of my father falling, bleeding beside that pillar in the

broken bank lobby while I hid. I hadn't helped.

I would never be that coward again.

I reached the door to my apartment, then fiddled with the keys. I heard a distant scrape but pretended not to notice. That would be the sniper on top of the playground equipment nearby, repositioning to aim at me. Yes, from this angle I saw for certain. That playground piece was just tall enough that the sniper would be able to shoot through the door into my apartment.

I stepped inside my single room. No hallways or anything else, just a hole cut into the steel, like most dwellings in the understreets. It might not have had a bathroom or running water, but I was still living quite well, by understreets standards. A whole room for a single person?

I kept it messy. Some old, disposable noodle bowls sat in a pile beside the door, smelling of spice. Clothing was strewn across the floor. I had a bucket of two-day-old water sitting on the table, and dirty, beat-up silverware sat in a pile beside it.

I didn't use those to eat. They were for show. So was the clothing; I didn't wear any of it. My actual clothing—four sturdy outfits, always clean and washed—was folded in the trunk beside my mattress on the floor. I *kept* my room messy, intentionally. It actually itched at me, as I liked things neat.

I'd found that sloppiness put people off guard. If my landlady came snooping up here, she'd find what she expected. A teenager just into his majority blowing his earnings on an easy life for a year before responsibility hit him. She wouldn't poke or prod for secret compartments.

I hurried to the trunk. I unlocked it and pulled out my backpack—already packed with a change of clothing, spare shoes, some dry rations, and two liters of water. There was a handgun in a pouch on one side, and the smoke grenade was in a pouch on the other side.

I walked to my mattress and unzipped the case. Inside was my life. Dozens of folders, filled with clippings from newspapers or scraps of information. Eight notebooks filled with my thoughts and findings. A larger notebook with my indexes.

Maybe I should have brought all of this with me when going to watch the Fortuity hit. After all, I'd hoped to leave with the Reckoners. I'd debated it but had eventually decided that it wouldn't be reasonable. There was so much of it, for one thing. I

could lug it all if I needed to, but it slowed me down.

And it was just too precious. This research was the most valuable thing in my life. Collecting some of it had nearly gotten me killed—spying on Epics, asking questions better left unasked, making payments to shady informants. I was proud of it, not to mention frightened about what might happen to it. I'd thought it safer here.

Boots shook the metal landing of the stairway outside. I looked over my shoulder and saw one of the most feared sights in the understreets: fully geared Enforcement officers. They stood on the landing, automatic rifles in their hands, sleek black helmets on their heads, military-grade armor on their chests, knees, arms. There were three of them.

Their helmets had black visors that came down over their eyes, leaving their mouths and chins exposed. The eye shields gave them night vision and glowed faintly green, with a strange smoky pattern that swirled and undulated across the front. It was transfixing, which was said to be the point.

I didn't need to act to make my eyes go wide, my muscles taut.

"Hands on your head," the lead officer said, rifle up at his shoulder and the barrel trained on me. "Down on your knees, subject."

That was what they called people, *subject*. Steelheart didn't bother with any kind of silly pretense that his empire was a republic or a representative government. He didn't call people *citizens* or *comrades*. They were subjects of his empire. That was that.

I quickly raised my hands. "I didn't do anything!" I whined. "I was just there to watch!"

"HANDS UP, KNEES DOWN!" the officer yelled.

I complied.

They entered the room, leaving the doorway conspicuously open so that their sniper had a view through the door. From what I'd read, these three would be part of a five-person squad known as a Core. Three regular troops, one specialist—in this case a sniper—and one minor Epic. Steelheart had about fifty Cores like this.

Almost all of Enforcement was made of special-operations teams. If there was any large-scale fighting to be done, something *very* dangerous, Steelheart, Nightwielder, Firefight, or maybe

Conflux—who was head of Enforcement—would deal with it personally. Enforcement was used for the smaller problems in the city, the ones Steelheart didn't want to bother with himself. In a way he didn't need Enforcement. They were like a homicidal dictator's version of valet parking attendants.

One of the three soldiers kept an eye on me while the other two rifled through the contents of my mattress. *Is she in here?* I wondered. *Invisible somewhere?* My instincts, and my memory of researching her, told me she'd be near.

I just had to hope she was in the room. I couldn't move until Cody and Megan fulfilled their part of my plan, though, so I waited, tense, for them to do so.

The two soldiers pulled notebooks and folders out from between the two pieces of foam that made up my mattress. One flipped through the notes. "This is information on Epics, sir," he said.

"I thought I'd be able to see Fortuity fight another Epic," I said, staring at the floor. "When I found out something terrible was happening, I tried to get away. I was only there to see what would happen, you know?"

The officer began looking through the notebooks. The soldier watching me seemed uncomfortable about something. He kept glancing at me, then at the others.

I felt my heart thumping, waiting. Megan and Cody would attack soon. I had to be ready.

"You are in serious trouble, subject," the officer said, tossing one of my notebooks to the floor. "An Epic, and an important one, is dead."

"I didn't have anything to do with it!" I said. "I swear. I—"

"Bah." The lead officer pointed toward one of the other soldiers.

"Gather this up."

"Sir," said the soldier watching me. "He's probably telling the truth."

I hesitated. That voice …

"Roy?" I said, shocked. He'd hit majority the year before me … and had joined Enforcement after that.

The officer glanced back at me. "You know this subject?"

"Yes," Roy said, sounding reluctant. He was a tall redhead. I'd always liked him. He'd been an adjunct at the Factory, which was

a position Martha gave to senior boys—they were meant to stop the young or weaker workers from being picked on. He'd done his job well.

"You didn't say anything?" the lead officer said, his voice hard.

"I … sir, I'm sorry. I should have. He's always had a fascination with Epics. I've seen him cross half the city on foot and wait in the rain just because he heard a new Epic might be passing through town. If he heard something about two of them fighting, he'd have gone to watch, whether it was a good idea or not."

"Sounds exactly like the kind of person who should be off the streets," the officer said. "Gather this. Son, you're going to come tell us *exactly* what you saw. If you do a good job, perhaps you might even live through the night. It—"

A gunshot sounded outside. The officer's face blossomed red, the front of his helmet exploding as a bullet hit him.

I rolled toward my backpack. Cody and Megan had done their job, quietly taking down the sniper and getting into position to support me.

I ripped open the Velcro on the side of my pack and pulled out my handgun, then fired rapidly at Roy's thighs. The bullets hit an open spot in his advanced plastic armor, dropping him, though I almost missed. Sparking pistols.

The other soldier fell to a well-placed shot from Cody, who would be on that playground equipment outside. I didn't stop to make sure the third soldier was dead—Refractionary might be in the room, armed and ready to shoot. I pulled out the smoke grenade and removed the pin.

I dropped the grenade. A burst of grey smoke jetted from the canister, filling the room. I held my breath, handgun up. Refractionary's powers would be negated when the smoke touched her. I waited for her to appear.

Nothing happened. She wasn't in the room.

Smothering a curse, still holding my breath, I glanced at Roy. He was trying to move, holding his leg and trying to point his rifle toward me. I leaped through the smoke and kicked the rifle aside. Then I pulled his sidearm out of its holster and tossed it. Both guns would be useless to me; they'd be keyed to his gloves.

Roy's hand was in his pocket. I put my gun to his temple and yanked his hand out. He'd been trying to dial his mobile. I cocked the gun, and he dropped the mobile.

“It’s too late anyway, David,” Roy spat, then started coughing at the smoke. “Conflux will know the moment we go offline. Other Cores are on their way here. They’ll send spying eyes down to watch. Those are probably already here.”

Breath still held, I checked the pockets on his cargo pants. There were no other weapons.

“You’re being a fool, David,” Roy said, coughing. I ignored him and scanned the room. I had to start breathing, and the smoke was getting overpowering.

Where was Refractionary? On the landing, maybe. I kicked the smoke grenade out, hoping she was there.

Nothing. Either I had her weakness wrong, or she’d decided not to join her team in coming to get me.

What if she was sneaking up on Megan and Cody? They’d never see her coming.

I glanced down. Roy’s mobile.

Worth a try.

I snatched the phone and opened the address book. Refractionary was listed under her Epic name. Most Epics preferred to use them.

I dialed.

Almost immediately, a gunshot sounded from the playground outside.

I couldn’t hold my breath any longer. I ducked outside, staying low, and kicked the smoke grenade off the landing. I started down the stairwell and took a deep breath.

Then, eyes watering, I scanned the playground. Cody knelt on top of the playground equipment, rifle out. At the base of the tower, Megan stood with her gun out, a body in black and yellow at her feet. Refractionary.

Megan fired again into the body, just to be certain, but the woman was obviously dead.

Another Epic eliminated.

11

MY first move was to go back in and toss Roy's rifle, which he had been crawling toward, out the door. Then I checked on the two other soldiers. One was dead; the other had a weak pulse—but he wasn't going to be waking anytime soon.

Time to move quickly. I pulled the notebooks from my mattress and stuffed them in my backpack. Six thick notebooks and one index caused the backpack to bulge. I thought for a moment, then took my extra pair of shoes out of the pack. I could buy new shoes, but I couldn't replace these notebooks.

The last two fit, and beside them I slid the folders about Steelheart, Nightwielder, and Firefight. After a moment I added the one about Conflux. It was the thinnest. Very little was known about the clandestine High Epic who ran Enforcement.

Roy was still coughing, though the smoke had cleared out. He pulled off his helmet. It was surreal to see that familiar face—one I'd known for years—wearing the uniform of the enemy. We hadn't been friends; I didn't really have those, but I'd looked up to him.

"You're working with the Reckoners," Roy said.

I needed to try to lay down a false trail, get him to think I was working for someone else. "What?" I said, doing my best to look baffled.

"Don't try to hide it, David. It's obvious. Everyone knows the Reckoners hit Fortuity."

I knelt down beside him, pack slung over my shoulder. "Look, Roy, don't let them heal you, okay? I know Enforcement has Epics who can do that. Don't let them, if you can manage it."

“What, why—”

“You want to be laid out sick for this next part, Roy,” I said softly, intensely. “Power is going to change hands in Newcago. Limelight is coming for Steelheart.”

“Limelight?” Roy said. “Who the hell is that?”

I walked over to the rest of my folders, then reluctantly took a can of lighter fluid from my trunk and poured it on the bed.

“You’re working for an Epic?” Roy whispered. “You really think anyone can challenge Steelheart? Sparks, David! How many rivals has he killed?”

“This is different,” I said, then got out some matches. “Limelight is different.” I lit the match.

I couldn’t take the remaining folders. They were source material, facts and articles for the information I’d collected in my notebooks. I wanted to take them, but there was no more room in my bag.

I dropped the match. The bed started aflame.

“One of your friends might still be alive,” I said to Roy, nodding to the two Enforcement officers who were down. The leader had been shot in the head, but the other one only in the side. “Get him out. Then stay out of things, Roy. Dangerous days are coming.”

I slung the pack over my shoulder and hastened out the door and onto the stairwell. I met Megan on the way down the steps.

“Your plan failed,” she said quietly.

“Worked well enough,” I said. “An Epic is dead.”

“Only because she left her mobile on vibrate,” Megan said, hurrying down the steps beside me. “If she hadn’t been sloppy …”

“We were lucky,” I agreed. “But we still won.”

Mobiles were just a part of daily life. The people might live in hovels, but they all had a mobile for entertainment.

We met Cody at the base of the playground tower near Refractionary’s corpse. He handed back my rifle. “Lad,” he said, “that was *awesome*.”

I blinked. I’d been expecting another berating, like Megan had given me.

“Prof is going to be jealous he didn’t come himself,” Cody said, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. “Were you the one who called her?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Awesome,” Cody said again, slapping me on the back.

Megan didn’t look nearly as pleased. She gave Cody a sharp look, then reached for my pack.

I resisted.

“You need two hands for the rifle,” she said, pulling it free and slinging it over her shoulder. “Let’s move. Enforcement will …” She trailed off as she noticed Roy barely managing to tow the other Enforcement officer out of the burning room and onto the landing.

I felt bad, but only a little. Copters were thumping above; he’d have help soon. We scurried across the park, heading toward the tunnels that led deeper into the understreets.

“You left them alive?” Megan asked as we ran.

“This was more useful,” I said. “I laid us a false trail. I told him a lie that I was working for an Epic who wants to challenge Steelheart. Hopefully it will keep them from searching for the Reckoners.” I hesitated. “Besides. They’re not our enemies.”

“Of course they are,” she snapped.

“No,” Cody said, jogging beside her. “He’s right, lass. They aren’t. They may work for the enemy, but they’re just regular folks. They do what they can to get by.”

“We can’t think like that,” she said as we reached a branching tunnel. She glared at me, eyes cold. “We can’t show them mercy. They won’t show it to us.”

“We can’t become them, lass,” Cody said, shaking his head. “Listen to Prof talk about it sometime. If we have to do what the Epics do to beat them, then it’s not worth it.”

“I’ve heard him talk,” she said, still looking at me. “I’m not worried about him. I’m worried about Knees here.”

“I’ll shoot an Enforcement officer if I have to,” I said, meeting her eyes. “But I won’t get distracted hunting them down. I have a goal. I’ll see Steelheart dead. That is all that matters.”

“Bah,” she said, turning away from me. “That’s not an answer.”

“Let’s keep moving,” Cody said, nodding toward a stairwell down to deeper tunnels.

“He’s a scientist, lad,” Cody explained as we walked through the narrow corridors of the steel catacombs. “Studied Epics in the early days, created some pretty remarkable devices, based on

what we learned from them. That's why he's called Prof, other than that lastname thing."

I nodded thoughtfully. Now that we were deep, Cody had relaxed. Megan was still stiff. She walked ahead, holding her mobile and using it to send Prof a report on the mission. Cody had his set to flashlight, hooked to the upper left of his camo jacket. I'd removed the network card from mine, which he said was a good idea until Abraham or Tia had a chance to tweak it.

It turned out that they didn't trust even the Knighthawk Foundry. The Reckoners usually left their mobiles linked only to one another, and had the transmissions encrypted on both ends, not using the regular network. Until I got the encryption too, I could at least use my mobile as a camera or a glorified flashlight.

Cody walked with a relaxed posture, rifle up on his shoulder, arm looped over it and hand hanging down. I seemed to have earned his approval with Refractionary's death.

"So where did he work?" I asked, hungry for information about Prof. There were so many rumors about the Reckoners, but few real facts.

"Don't know," Cody admitted. "Nobody's sure what Prof's past is, though Tia probably knows something. She doesn't talk about it. Abe and I have bets going 'bout what Prof's specific workplace was. I'm pretty sure he was at some kind of secret government organization."

"Really?" I asked.

"Sure," Cody said. "I wouldn't be surprised if it was the same one that caused Calamity."

That was one of the theories, that the United States government —or sometimes the European Union—had somehow set off Calamity while trying to start a superhuman project. I thought it was pretty far-fetched. I'd always figured it was some kind of comet that got caught in Earth's gravity, but I didn't know if the science of that made any sense. Maybe it was a satellite. That could fit Cody's theory.

He wouldn't be the only one who thought it reeked of conspiracy. There *were* a lot of things about the Epics that didn't add up.

"Oh, you got that look," Cody said, pointing at me.

"That look?"

"Y'all think I'm crazy."

“No. No, of course not.”

“You do. Well, it’s okay. I know what I know, even if Prof rolls his eyes whenever I say anything about it.” Cody smiled. “But that’s another story. As for Prof’s line of work, I think it *must* have been some kind of weapons facility. He created the tensors, after all.”

“The tensors?”

“Prof wouldn’t want you talking about that,” Megan said, looking over her shoulder. “Nobody gave authorization for *him* to know about it,” she added, glancing at me.

“I’m giving it,” Cody said, relaxed. “He’s going to see anyway, lass. And *don’t* quote Prof’s rules at me.”

She closed her mouth; she looked like she’d been about to do just that.

“The tensors?” I asked again.

“Something Prof invented,” Cody said. “Either right before or right after he left the lab. He’s got a couple of things like that, inventions that give us our main edge against the Epics. Our jackets are one of those—they can take a lot of punishment—and the tensors are another.”

“But what *are* they?”

“Gloves,” Cody said. “Well, devices in the form of gloves. They create vibrations that disrupt solid objects. Works best on dense stuff, like stone and metal, some kinds of wood. Turns that kind of material to dust, but won’t do anything to a living animal or person.”

“You’re kidding.” In all my years of research I’d never heard of any technology like that.

“Nope,” Cody said. “They’re difficult to use, though. Abraham and Tia are the most skilled. But you’ll see—the tensors, they let us go where we’re not supposed to be. Where we’re not expected to be.”

“That’s amazing,” I said, my mind racing. The Reckoners *did* have a reputation for being able to get where nobody thought they could. There were stories … Epics killed in their own chambers, well guarded and presumed safe. Near-magical escapes by the Reckoners.

A device that could turn stone and metal to powder … You could get through locked doors, regardless of the security devices. You could sabotage vehicles. Maybe even knock down buildings.

Suddenly, some of the most baffling mysteries surrounding the Reckoners made sense to me. How they'd gotten in to trap Daystorm, how they'd escaped the time when Calling War had nearly cornered them.

They'd have to be clever about how they entered, so as to not leave obvious holes that gave them away. But I could see how it would work. "But why …," I asked, dazed, "why are you telling me this?"

"As I said, lad," Cody explained. "You're going to see them at work soon anyway. Might as well prepare you for it. Besides, you already know so much about us that one more thing won't matter."

"Okay." I said it lightly, then caught the somber tone of his voice. He'd left something unsaid: I already knew so much that I couldn't be allowed to go free.

Prof had given me my chance to leave. I'd insisted they bring me. At this point I either convinced them utterly that I wasn't a threat and joined them, or they left me behind. Dead.

I swallowed uncomfortably, my mouth suddenly dry. *I asked for this*, I told myself sternly. I'd known that once I joined them—if I joined them—I wouldn't ever be leaving. I was in, and that was that.

"So …" I tried to force myself not to dwell on the fact that this man—or any of them—might someday decide I needed to be shot in the name of the common good. "So how did he figure these gloves out? The tensors? I've never heard of anything *like* them."

"Epics," Cody said, his voice growing amiable again. "Prof let it drop once. The technology came from studying an Epic who could do something similar. Tia says it happened in the early days—before society collapsed, some Epics were captured and held. Not all of them are so powerful they can escape captivity with ease. Different labs ran tests on them, trying to figure out how their powers worked. The technology for things like the tensors came from those days."

I hadn't heard that, and some things started to click into place for me. We'd made great advances in technology back then, right around the arrival of Calamity. Energy weapons, advanced power sources and batteries, new mobile technology—which was why ours worked underground and at a significant range without using towers.

Of course, we lost much of it when the Epics started to take over. And what we didn't lose, Epics like Steelheart controlled. I tried to imagine those early Epics being tested. Was that why so many were evil? They resented this testing?

"Did any of them go to the testing willingly?" I asked. "How many labs were doing this?"

"I don't know," Cody said. "I reckon it's not very important."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Cody shrugged, rifle still over his shoulder, the light of his mobile illuminating the tomblike metal corridor. The catacombs smelled of dust and condensation. "Tia is always talking about the scientific foundation of the Epics," he said. "I don't think they can be explained that way. Too much about them breaks what science says should happen. I sometimes wonder if they came along *because* we thought we could explain everything."

It didn't take much longer for us to arrive. I'd noticed that Megan was leading us by way of her mobile, which showed a map on its screen. That was remarkable. A map of the steel catacombs? I didn't think such a thing existed.

"Here," Megan said, waving to a thick patch of wires hanging down like a curtain in front of a wall. Sights like that were common down here, where the Diggers had left things unfinished.

Cody walked up and banged on a plate near the wires. A distant bang came back at him a few moments later.

"In you go, Knees," he said to me, gesturing toward the wires.

I took a breath and stepped forward, pushing them aside with the barrel of my rifle. There was a small tunnel beyond, leading steeply upward. I would have to crawl. I looked back at him.

"It's safe," he promised. I couldn't tell if he was making me go first because of some latent mistrust, or because he liked seeing me squirm. It didn't seem the time to question him or back down. I started crawling.

The tunnel was small enough to make me worry that if I slung my rifle on my back, a good scrape stood a chance of knocking the scope or sights out of alignment. So I kept it in my right hand as I crawled, which made it all the more awkward. The tunnel led toward a distant, soft light, and the crawl took long enough that my knees were aching by the time I reached the light. A strong hand took me by the left arm, helping me out of the tunnel. Abraham. The dark-skinned man had changed into cargo pants

and a green tank top, which showed well-muscled arms. I hadn't noticed before, but he was wearing a small silver pendant around his neck, hanging out of his shirt.

The room I stepped into was unexpectedly large. Big enough for the team to have laid out their equipment and several bedrolls without it feeling cramped. There was a large table made of metal that grew right out of the floor, as well as benches at the walls and stools around the table.

They carved it there, I realized, looking at the sculpted walls. *They made this room with the tensors. Carved furniture right into it*.

It was impressive. I gawked as I stepped back and let Abraham help Megan out of the tunnel. The chamber had two doorways into other rooms that looked smaller. It was lit by lanterns, and there were cords on the floor—taped in place and out of the way—leading down another small tunnel.

"You have electricity," I said. "How did you get electricity?"

"Tapped into an old subway line," Cody said, crawling out of the tunnel. "One that was half completed, then forgotten about. The nature of this place is that even Steelheart doesn't know all of its nooks and dead ends."

"Just more proof the Diggers were mad," Abraham said. "They wired things in strange ways. We've found rooms that were sealed completely but had lights left on inside, shining for years by themselves. *Repaire des fantômes*."

"Megan tells me," Prof said, appearing from one of the other rooms, "that you recovered the information, but that your means were … unconventional." The aging but sturdy man still wore his black lab coat.

"Hell yeah!" Cody said, shouldering his rifle.

Prof snorted. "Well, let's see what you recovered before I decide if I should yell at you or not." He reached for the backpack in Megan's hand.

"Actually," I said, stepping toward it, "I can—"

"You'll sit down, son," Prof said, "while I have a look at this. All of it. Then we'll talk."

His voice was calm, but I got the message. I pensively sat down beside the steel table as the others gathered around the pack and began rifling through my life.

12

“WOW,” Cody said. “Honestly, lad, I thought you were exaggerating. But y’all really are a full-blown supergeek, aren’t you?”

I blushed, still sitting on my stool. They had opened the folders I’d packed and spread out the contents, then moved on to my notebooks, passing them around and studying them. Cody had eventually lost interest and moved over to sit by me, his back to the table and elbows hitched up on it behind him.

“I had a job to do,” I said. “I decided to do it well.”

“This *is* impressive,” Tia said. She sat cross-legged on the floor. She had changed to jeans but was still wearing her blouse and blazer, and her short red hair was still perfectly styled. Tia held up one of my notebooks. “It’s rudimentary in organization,” she said, “and doesn’t use standard classifications. But it is exhaustive.”

“There are standard classifications?” I asked.

“Several different systems,” she said. “It looks like you’ve got a few of the terms here that cross between the systems, like High Epic—though I personally prefer the tier system. In other places, what you’ve come up with is interesting. I do like some of your terminology, like *prime invincibility*.”

“Thanks,” I said, though I felt a little embarrassed. Of course there were ways of classifying Epics. I hadn’t the education—or the resources—to learn such things, so I’d made up my own.

It was surprising how easy it had been. There were outliers, of course—bizarre Epics with powers that didn’t fit any of the classifications—but a surprising number of the others showed

similarities. There were always individual quirks, like the glimmering of Refractionary's illusions. The core abilities, however, were often very similar.

"Explain this to me," Tia said, holding up a different notebook.

Hesitantly, I slid off my stool and joined her on the floor. She was pointing toward a notation I'd made at the bottom of the entry for a particular Epic named Strongtower.

"It's my Steelheart mark," I said. "Strongtower shows an ability like Steelheart has. I watch Epics like that carefully. If they get killed, or they manifest a limitation to their powers, I want to be aware of them."

Tia nodded. "Why didn't you lump the mental illusionists with the photon-manipulators?"

"I like to make groupings based on limitations," I said, getting out my index and flipping to a specific page for her. Epics with illusion powers fell into two groups. Some created actual changes in the way light behaved, crafting illusions with photons themselves. Others made illusions by affecting the brains of the people around them. They really created hallucinations, not true illusions.

"See," I said, pointing. "The mental illusionists tend to be limited in similar ways to other mentalists—like those with hypnotism powers, or mind-control effects. Illusionists that can alter light work differently. They are far more similar to the electricity-manipulation Epics."

Cody whistled softly. He'd gotten out a canteen and held it in one hand while still leaning back against the table. "Lad, I think we need to have a conversation about how much time you've got on your hands and how we can put it to better use."

"Better use than researching how to kill Epics?" Tia asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Sure," Cody said, taking a swig from his canteen. "Think of what he could do if I got him to organize all of the pubs in town, by brew!"

"Oh please," Tia said drily, turning a page in my notes.

"Abraham," Cody said. "Ask me why it's tragic for the young David to have spent so much time on these notebooks."

"Why is it tragic for the boy to have done such research?" Abraham said, still cleaning his gun.

"That's a very astute question," Cody said. "Thank you very

much for asking."

"It is my pleasure."

"Anyway," Cody said, raising his canteen, "why do you want so badly to kill these Epics?"

"Revenge," I said. "Steelheart killed my father. I intend—"

"Yes, yes," Cody said, cutting me off. "Y'all intend to see him bleed again, and all that. Very dedicated and familial of you. But I'm telling you, that ain't enough. You've got passion to kill, but you need to find passion to live. At least that's what I think."

I didn't know how to respond to that. Studying Steelheart, learning about Epics so that I could find a way to kill him, *was* my passion. If there was a place I fit in, wasn't it with the Reckoners? That was their life's work too, wasn't it?

"Cody," Prof said, "why don't you go finish working on the third chamber?"

"Sure thing, Prof," the sniper said, screwing on the lid of his canteen. He sauntered out of the room.

"Don't listen too much to Cody, son," Prof said, setting one of my notebooks on the stack. "He says the same things to the rest of us. He worries we'll focus so hard on killing the Epics that we'll forget to live our lives."

"He might be right," I said. "I … I really haven't had much of a life, other than this."

"The work we do," Prof said, "is not about living. Our job is killing. We'll leave the regular people to live their lives, to find joy in them, to enjoy the sunrises and the snowfalls. Our job is to get them there."

I had memories of the world before. It had only been ten years ago, after all. It's just that it was difficult to remember a world of sunshine when darkness was all you saw each day. Remembering that time … it was like trying to recall the specifics of my father's face. You forget things like that, gradually.

"Jonathan," Abraham said to Prof, slipping the barrel back onto his gun, "have you considered the things this boy said?"

"I'm not a boy," I said.

They all looked at me. Even Megan, standing beside the doorway.

"I just wanted to note it," I said, suddenly uncomfortable. "I mean, I'm eighteen. I've hit my majority. I'm not a child."

Prof eyed me. Then, surprisingly, he nodded. "Age has nothing

to do with it, but you've helped kill two Epics, which is good enough for me. It should be for any of us."

"Very well," Abraham said, voice soft. "But Prof, we have spoken of this before. By killing Epics like Fortuity, are we really achieving anything?"

"We fight back," Megan said. "We're the only ones who do. It's important."

"And yet," Abraham said, snapping another piece onto his gun, "we are afraid to fight the most powerful. And so, the domination of the tyrants continues. So long as they do not fall, the others will not truly fear us. They will fear Steelheart, Obliteration, and Night's Sorrow. If we will not face creatures such as these, is there any hope that others will someday stand up to them?"

The steel-walled room went quiet, and I held my breath. The words were nearly the same I had used earlier, but coming from Abraham's soft-spoken, lightly accented voice, they seemed to hold more weight.

Prof turned to Tia.

She held up a photograph. "This is really Nightwielder?" she asked me. "You're sure of it?"

The picture was a prize of my possessions, a photograph of Nightwielder beside Steelheart on the Day of Annexation, just before his darkness had come upon the city. As far as I knew, it was one of a kind, sold to me by an urchin whose father had taken it with an old Polaroid camera.

Nightwielder was normally translucent, incorporeal. He could move through solid objects and control darkness itself. He appeared often in the city, but was always in his incorporeal form. In this picture he was solid, wearing a sharp black suit and hat. He had Asian features and black shoulder-length hair. I had other pictures of him in his incorporeal form. The face was the same.

"It's obviously him," I said.

"And the photo wasn't doctored," Tia said.

"I …" That I couldn't prove. "I can't promise it wasn't, though its being a Polaroid makes that less likely. Tia, he has to be corporeal *some* of the time. That photo is the best clue, but I have others. People who have smelled phosphorus and spotted someone walking by who matches his description." Phosphorus was one of the signs of him using his powers. "I've found a dozen

sources that all match this idea. It's *sunlight* that makes the difference—I suspect it's the ultraviolet part of sunlight that matters. Bathed in it, he turns corporeal."

Tia held the photo before her, contemplating it. Then she began scanning through my other notes on Nightwielder. "I think we need to investigate it, Jon," she said. "If there's a chance we can actually get to Steelheart …"

"We can," I said. "I have a plan. It will work."

"This is stupidity," Megan cut in. She stood by the wall with her arms crossed. "Sheer stupidity. We don't even know his weakness."

"We can figure it out," I shot back. "I'm sure of it. We have the clues we need."

"Even if we did figure it out," Megan said, throwing a hand up into the air, "it would be practically useless. The obstacles in even *getting* to Steelheart are insurmountable!"

I locked eyes with her, fighting down my anger. I got the feeling she was arguing with me not because she actually disagreed, but because she found me offensive for some reason.

"I—" I began, but Prof interrupted me.

"Everyone follow me," he said, standing up.

I shared a glare with Megan, and then we all moved, joining him as he walked toward the smaller room to the right of the main chamber. Even Cody made his way in from the third room —unsurprisingly, he'd been listening. He wore a glove on his right hand. It glowed with a soft green light at the palm.

"Is the imager ready?" Prof asked.

"Mostly," Abraham said. "It's one of the first things I set up." He knelt beside a device on the floor connected to the wall by several wires. He turned it on.

Suddenly, all of the metal surfaces in the room turned black. I jumped. It felt like we were floating in darkness.

Prof raised a hand, then tapped on the wall in a pattern. The walls changed to show a view of the city, presenting it as if we were standing atop a six-story building. Lights sparkled in the blackness, shining from the hundreds of steel buildings that made up Newcago. The old buildings were less uniform; the new buildings, spreading out onto what had once been the lake, were more modern. They had been built from other materials, then intentionally transformed to steel. You could do some interesting

things with architecture, I'd heard, when you had that option.

"This is one of the most advanced cities in the world," Prof said. "Ruled by arguably the most powerful Epic in North America. If we move against him, we raise the stakes dramatically—and we're already betting up to the limits of what we can pay. Failure could mean the end of the Reckoners completely. It could bring disaster, could end the last bit of resistance against the Epics that mankind has left."

"Just let me tell you the plan," I said. "I think it will persuade you." I had a hunch. Prof *wanted* to go after Steelheart. If I could make my case, he'd side with me.

Prof turned to me, meeting my eyes. "You want us to do this? Fine, I'll give you your shot. But I don't want you to persuade me." He pointed to Megan, who stood beside the doorway, her arms still crossed. "Persuade *her*."

13

PERSUADE her. *Great*, I thought. Megan's eyes could have drilled holes through … well, anything, I guess. I mean, eyes can't normally drill holes through things, so the metaphor works regardless, right?

Megan's eyes could have drilled holes through butter. *Persuade her?* I thought. *Impossible.*

But I wasn't going to give up without trying. I stepped up to the wall of glistening metal overlaid with the outline of Newcago.

"The imager can show us anything?" I asked.

"Anything the basic spynet watches or listens to," Abraham explained, standing up from the imaging device.

"The spynet?" I said, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. I walked forward. This device was remarkable; it made me feel as if we really were standing on top of a building outside in the city, rather than in a box of a room. It wasn't a perfect illusion—if I looked around closely I could still see the corners of the room we were standing in, and the 3-D imaging wasn't great for things nearby.

Still, so long as I didn't look too closely—and didn't pay attention to the lack of wind or scents of the city—I really could imagine I was outside. They were constructing this image using the spynet? That was Steelheart's surveillance system for the city, the means by which Enforcement kept tabs on what the people in Newcago were doing.

"I knew he was watching us," I said, "but I hadn't realized that the cameras were so … extensive."

"Fortunately," Tia said, "we've found some ways to influence

what the network sees and hears. So don't worry about Steelheart spying on us."

I still felt uncomfortable, but it wasn't worth thinking on at the moment. I stepped up to the edge of the roof, looking down at the street below. A few cars passed, and the imager relayed the sounds of their driving. I reached forward and placed my hand on the wall of the room—seemingly touching something invisible in midair. This was going to be very disorienting.

Unlike the tensors, room imagers I'd heard of—people paid good money to visit imager films. My conversation with Cody left me thinking. Had we learned how to do things like this from Epics with illusion powers?

"I—" I began.

"No," Megan said. "If he has to convince me, then I'm driving this conversation." She stepped up beside me.

"But—"

"Go ahead, Megan," Prof said.

I grumbled to myself and stepped back to where I didn't feel I was on the verge of a multistory plummet.

"It's simple," Megan said. "There's one enormous problem in facing Steelheart."

"One?" Cody asked, leaning back against the wall. It made him look like he was leaning against open air. "Let's see: incredible strength, can shoot deadly blasts of energy from his hands, can transform anything nonliving around him into steel, can command the winds and fly with perfect control … oh, and he's utterly impervious to bullets, edged weapons, fire, radiation, blunt trauma, suffocation, and explosions. That's like … *three* things, lass." He held up four fingers.

Megan rolled her eyes. "All true," she said, then turned back to me. "But none of that is even the first problem."

"Finding him is the first problem," Prof said softly. He'd set out a folding chair, Tia as well, and the two were sitting in the center of the imaged rooftop. "Steelheart is paranoid. He makes certain nobody knows where he is."

"Exactly," Megan said, raising her hands and using a thumbs-out gesture to control the imager. We zoomed through the city, the buildings a blur beneath us.

I wobbled, my stomach flip-flopping. I reached for the wall, but I wasn't certain where it was, and stumbled to the side until I

found it. Abruptly we halted, hanging in midair, looking at Steelheart's palace.

It was a dark fortress of anodized steel that rose from the edge of the city, built upon the portion of the lake that had been transformed to steel. It spread out in either direction, a long line of dark metal with towers, girders, and walkways. Like some mash-up of an old Victorian manor, a medieval castle, and an oil rig. Violent red lights shone from deep within the various recesses, and smoke billowed from chimneys, black against a black sky.

"They say he intentionally built the place to be confusing," Megan said. "There are hundreds of chambers, and he sleeps in a different one each night, eats in a different one for each meal. Supposedly even the staff doesn't know where he'll be." She turned to me, hostile. "You'll never find him. *That's* the first problem."

I swayed, still feeling as if I were standing in midair, though none of the others seemed to be having trouble. "Could we …," I asked nauseously, looking back at Abraham.

He chuckled, making some gestures and pulling us back to the top of a nearby building. There was a small chimney on it, and as we "landed" the chimney squished flat, becoming two-dimensional on the floor. This wasn't a hologram—so far as I knew, nobody had mimicked that level of illusion power with technology. It was just a very advanced use of six screens and some 3-D imaging.

"Right," I said, feeling steadier. "Anyway, that *would be* a problem."

"Except?" Prof asked.

"Except we don't need to find Steelheart," I said. "He'll come to us."

"He rarely comes out in public anymore," Megan said. "And when he does, it's erratic. How in Calamity's fires are you going to—"

"Faultline," I said. The Epic who had made the earth swallow the bank on that terrible day when my father had been killed, and who had later challenged Steelheart.

"David has a point," Abraham said. "Steelheart *did* come out of hiding to fight her when she tried to take Newcago."

"And when Ides Hatred came here to challenge him," I said.

“Steelheart met the challenge personally.”

“As I recall,” Prof said, “they destroyed an entire city block in that conflict.”

“Sounds like quite the party,” Cody noted.

“Yes,” I said. I had pictures of that fight.

“So you’re saying we need to convince a powerful Epic to come to Newcago and challenge him,” Megan said, her voice flat. “Then we’ll know where he’s going to be. Sounds easy.”

“No, no,” I said, turning to face them, my back to the dark, smoldering expanse of Steelheart’s palace. “That’s the first part of the plan. We make Steelheart *think* a powerful Epic is coming here to challenge him.”

“How would we do that?” Cody asked.

“We’ve already started,” I explained. “Now we spread word that Fortuity was killed by agents of a new Epic. We start hitting more Epics, leaving the impression that it’s all the work of the same rival. Then we deliver an ultimatum to Steelheart that if he wants to stop the murder of his followers, he’ll need to come out and fight.

“And he *will* come. So long as we’re convincing enough. You said he’s paranoid, Prof. You’re right. He is—and he can’t stand a challenge to his authority. He always deals with rival Epics in person, just like he did with Deathpoint all those years ago. If there’s one thing that the Reckoners are good at, it’s killing Epics. If we hunt down enough of them in the city in a short time, it will be a threat to Steelheart. We can draw him out, choose our own battlefield. We can make him come to us and walk right into our trap.”

“Won’t happen,” Megan said. “He’ll just send Firefight or Nightwielder.”

Firefight and Nightwielder, two immensely powerful High Epics who acted as Steelheart’s bodyguards and right-hand men. They were nearly as dangerous as he was.

“I’ve shown you Nightwielder’s weakness,” I said. “It’s sunlight—ultraviolet radiation. He doesn’t know that anyone is aware of it. We can use that to trap him.”

“You haven’t proven anything,” Megan said. “You’ve shown us he *has* a weakness. But every Epic does. You don’t know it’s the sunlight.”

“I glanced through his sources,” Tia said. “It … it really does

look like David might have something."

Megan clenched her jaw. If this came down to me convincing her to agree to my plan, I was going to fail. She didn't look like she'd agree no matter how good my arguments.

But I wasn't convinced I needed her support, regardless of what Prof said. I'd seen how the other Reckoners looked to him. If he decided this was a good idea, they'd follow. I just had to hope that my reasoning would be good enough for him, even though he'd said I needed to convince Megan.

"Firefight," Megan said. "What about him?"

"Easy," I said, my mood lifting. "Firefight isn't what he seems."

"What does that mean?"

"I'll need my notes to explain," I said. "But he'll be the easiest of the three to take down—I promise you that."

Megan made a face as if she were offended by this, annoyed that I wasn't willing to engage her without my notes. "Whatever," she said, then made a gesture, spinning the room around in a circle and sending me stumbling again, though there was no momentum. She glanced at me, and I saw a hint of a smile on her lips. Well, at least I knew one thing that broke through her coldness: nearly making me lose my lunch.

When the room stopped rotating, our view pointed upward at an angle. Every part of me said I should be sliding backward into the wall, but I knew it was all just done with perspective.

Directly ahead of us a group of three copters moved through the air low, just above the city. They were sleek and black, with two large rotors each. The sword-and-shield emblem of Enforcement painted in white on their sides.

"It probably won't even come to Firefight and Nightwielder," she said. "I should have brought this up first: Enforcement."

"She's right," Abraham said. "Steelheart is always surrounded by Enforcement soldiers."

"So we take them out first," I said. "It's what a rival Epic would probably do anyway—disable Steelheart's army so they could move in on the city. That will only help convince him that we're a rival Epic. The Reckoners would never do something like take on Enforcement."

"We wouldn't do it," Megan said, "because it would be pure idiocy!"

"It does seem a little outside our capabilities, son," Prof said,

though I could tell I had him hooked. He watched with interest. He liked the idea of drawing Steelheart out. It was the sort of thing the Reckoners *did* do, playing on an Epic's arrogance.

I raised my hands, imitating the gestures the others had been making, then thrust them forward to try moving the viewing room toward Enforcement headquarters. The room lurched awkwardly, tipping sideways and streaking through the city to slam into the side of a building. It froze there, unable to continue into the structure because the spynet didn't look there. The entire room quivered, as if desperate to fulfill my demand but uncertain where to go.

I toppled sideways into the wall, then plopped down on the ground, dizzy. "Uh …"

"Y'all want me to get that for you?" Cody asked, amused, from the doorway.

"Yeah. Thanks. Enforcement headquarters, please."

Cody made the gestures and raised the room up, leveled it out, then spun it about and moved it over the city until we were hovering near a large black box of a building. It looked vaguely like a prison, though it didn't house criminals. Well, just the state-sanctioned kinds of criminals.

I righted myself, determined not to look like a fool in front of the others. Though I wasn't certain if that was possible at this point. "There's one simple way to neuter Enforcement," I said. "We take out Conflux."

For once an idea of mine didn't prompt an outcry from the others. Even Megan looked thoughtful, standing just a short distance from me, her arms crossed. *I'd love to see her smile again*, I thought, then immediately forced my mind away from that. I had to stay focused. This wasn't a time to let my feet get swept out from underneath me. Well … in a figurative sense, at least.

"You've considered this," I guessed, looking around the room. "You hit Fortuity, but you talked about trying for Conflux instead."

"It would be a powerful blow," Abraham said softly, leaning against the wall near Cody.

"Abraham suggested it," Prof said. "He fought for it, actually. Using some of the same arguments that you made—that we weren't doing enough, that we weren't targeting Epics who were important enough."

“Conflux is more than just the head of Enforcement,” I said, excited. They finally seemed like they were listening. “He’s a gifter.”

“A what?” Cody asked.

“It’s a slang term,” Tia said, “for what we call a transference Epic.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Great,” Cody said. “So what’s a transference Epic?”

“Don’t you *ever* pay attention?” Tia asked. “We’ve talked about this.”

“He was cleaning his guns,” Abraham said.

“I’m an artist,” Cody said.

Abraham nodded. “He’s an artist.”

“And cleanliness is next to deadliness,” Cody added.

“Oh please,” Tia said, turning back to me.

“A gifter,” I said, “is an Epic who has the ability to transfer his powers to other people. Conflux has two powers he can give others, and both are incredibly strong. Maybe even stronger than those of Steelheart.”

“So why doesn’t *he* rule?” Cody asked.

“Who knows?” I shrugged. “Probably because he’s fragile. He isn’t said to have any immortality powers. So he stays hidden. Nobody even knows what he looks like. He’s been with Steelheart for over half a decade, though, quietly managing Enforcement.” I looked back at Enforcement headquarters. “He can create enormous stores of energy from his body. He gives this electricity to team leaders of Enforcement Cores; that’s how they run their mechanized suits and their energy rifles. No Conflux means no power armor and no energy weapons.”

“It means more than that,” Prof said. “Taking out Conflux might knock out power to the city.”

“What?” I asked.

“Newcago uses more electricity than it generates,” Tia explained. “All of those lights, on all the time … it’s a huge drain, on a level that would have been hard to sustain even back before Calamity. The new Fractured States don’t have the infrastructure to provide Steelheart with enough power to run this city, yet he does.”

“He’s using Conflux to augment his power stores,” Prof said. “Somehow.”

“So that makes Conflux an even better target!” I said.

“We talked about this months ago,” Prof said, leaning forward, fingers laced before him. “We decided he was too dangerous to hit. Even if we succeeded, we’d draw too much attention, be hunted down by Steelheart himself.”

“Which is what we want,” I said.

The others didn’t seem convinced. Take this step, move against Steelheart’s empire, and they’d be exposing themselves. No more hiding in the various urban undergrounds, hitting carefully chosen targets. No more quiet rebellion. Kill Conflux, and there would be no backing down until Steelheart was dead or the Reckoners were captured, broken, and executed.

He’s going to say no, I thought, looking into Prof’s eyes. He looked older than I’d always imagined him being. A man in his middle years, with grey speckling his hair, and with a face that showed he had lived through the death of one era and had worked ten hard years trying to end the next era. Those years had taught him caution.

He opened his mouth to say the words, but was interrupted when Abraham’s mobile chirped. Abraham unhooked it from its shoulder mount. “Time for Reinforcement,” he said, smiling.

Reinforcement. Steelheart’s daily message to his subjects. “Can you show it on the wall here?” I asked.

“Sure,” Cody said, turning his mobile toward the projector and tapping a button.

“That won’t be ne—” Prof began.

The program had already started. It showed Steelheart this time. Sometimes he appeared personally, sometimes not. He stood atop one of the tall radio towers on his palace. A pitch-black cape spread out behind him, rippling in the wind.

The messages were all prerecorded, but there was no way to tell when; as always there was no sun in the sky, and no trees grew in the city any longer to give an indication of the season either. I’d almost forgotten what it was like to be able to tell the time of day just by looking out the window.

Steelheart was illuminated by red lights from below. He placed one foot on a low railing, then leaned forward and scanned his city. His dominion.

I shivered, staring at him, presented in large scale on the wall in front of me. My father’s murderer. The tyrant. He looked so

calm, so thoughtful, in this picture. Long jet-black hair that curled softly down to his shoulders. Shirt stretched across an inhumanly strong physique. Black slacks, an upgrade from the loose pants he'd worn on that day ten years ago. This shot of him seemed like it wanted to present him as the thoughtful and concerned dictator, like the early communist leaders I'd learned about back in the Factory school.

He raised a hand, staring intently at the city beneath him, and the hand started to glow with a wicked power. Yellow-white, to contrast the violent red below. The power around his hand wasn't electricity but raw *energy*. He built it up for a time, until it was shining so brightly the camera couldn't distinguish anything but the light and the shadow of Steelheart in front of it.

Then he pointed and launched a bolt of blazing yellow force into the city. The power hit a building, blasting a hole through the side, sending flames and debris exploding out the opposite windows. As the building smoldered, people fled from it. The camera zoomed in, making sure to catch sight of them. Steelheart wanted us to know he was firing on an inhabited structure.

Another bolt followed, causing the building to lurch, the steel of one side melting and caving inward. He fired twice more into a building beside it, starting the innards there aflame as well, walls melting from the enormous power of the energy he threw.

The camera pulled back and turned to Steelheart again, still in the same half-crouched stance. He looked down at the city, face impassive, red light from beneath limning a strong jaw and contemplative eyes. There was no explanation of why he'd destroyed those buildings, though perhaps a later message would explain the sins—real or perceived—that the inhabitants were guilty of.

Or perhaps not. Living in Newcago brought risks; one of them was that Steelheart could decide to execute you and your family without explanation. The flip side was that for those risks, you got to live in a place with electricity, running water, jobs, and food. Those were rare commodities in much of the land now.

I took a step forward, walking right up to the wall to study the creature that loomed there. *He wants us to be terrified*, I thought. *It's what this is all about. He wants us to think no one can challenge him.*

Early scholars had wondered if perhaps Epics were some new

stage in human development. An evolutionary breakthrough. I didn't accept that. This thing wasn't human. It never had been. Steelheart turned to look toward the camera, and there was a hint of a smile on his lips.

A chair scraped behind me and I turned. Prof had stood up and was staring at Steelheart. Yes, there was hatred there. Deep hatred. Prof looked down and met my eyes. It happened again, that moment of understanding.

Each of us knew where the other stood.

"You haven't said how you'll kill him," Prof said to me. "You haven't convinced Megan. All you've shown is that you have a fragile half of a plan."

"I've seen him bleed," I said. "The secret is in my head somewhere, Prof. It's the best chance you or anyone will ever have at killing him. Can you pass that up? Can you *really* walk away when you've got a shot?"

Prof met my eyes. He stared into them for a long moment. Behind me Steelheart's transmission ended, and the wall went black.

Prof was right. My plan, clever though it had once seemed to me, depended on a lot of speculation. Draw Steelheart out with a fake Epic. Take down his bodyguards. Upend Enforcement. Kill him using a secret weakness that might be hidden in my memory somewhere.

A fragile half plan indeed. That was why I had needed to come to the Reckoners. They could make it happen. This man, Jonathan Phaedrus, could make it happen.

"Cody," Prof said, turning, "start training the new kid with a tensor. Tia, let's see if we can start tracking Conflux's movements. Abraham, we're going to need some brainstorming on how to imitate a High Epic, if that's even possible."

I felt my heart jump. "We're going to do it?"

"Yes," Prof said. "God help us, we are."

PART TWO

14

"NOW, y'all gotta be *gentle* with her," Cody said. "Like caressing a beautiful woman the night before the big caber toss."

"Caber toss?" I said as I raised my hands toward the chunk of steel on the chair in front of me. I sat cross-legged on the floor of the Reckoner hideout, Cody on the ground beside me, his back to the wall and legs stretched out in front of him. It had been a week since the hit on Fortuity.

"Yeah, caber toss," Cody said. Though his accent was purely Southern—and strongly that—he always talked as if he were from Scotland. I guessed his family was from there or something. "It's this sport we had back in the homeland. Involved throwing trees."

"Little saplings? Like javelins?"

"No, no. The cabers had to be so wide that your fingers couldn't touch on the other side when you reached your arms around them. We'd rip 'em out of the ground, then hurl them as far as we could."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Bonus points if you could hit a bird out of the air," he added.

"Cody," Tia said, walking by with a sheaf of papers, "do you even know what a caber is?"

"A tree," he said. "We used them to build show houses. It's where the word *cabaret* came from, lass." He said it with such a straight face that I had trouble determining if he was sincere or not.

"You're a buffoon," Tia said, sitting down at the table, which was spread with various detailed maps that I hadn't been able to

make sense of. They appeared to be city plans and schematics, dating from before the Annexation.

"Thank you," Cody said, tipping his camo baseball cap toward her.

"It wasn't a compliment."

"Oh, you didn't mean it as one, lass," Cody said. "But the word *buffoon*, it comes from the word *buff*, meaning strong and handsome, which in turn—"

"Aren't you supposed to be helping David learn the tensors?" she interrupted. "And *not* bothering me."

"It's all right," Cody said. "I can do both. I'm a man of many talents."

"None of which involve remaining silent, unfortunately," Tia muttered, leaning down and making a few notations on her map.

I smiled, though even after a week with them I wasn't certain what to make of the Reckoners. I'd imagined each pod of them as an elite special forces group, tightly knit and intensely loyal to one another.

There was some of that in this group; even Tia and Cody's banter was generally good-natured. However, there was also a lot of individuality to them. They each kind of … did their own thing. Prof didn't seem so much a leader as a middle manager. Abraham worked on the technology, Tia the research, Megan information gathering, and Cody odd jobs—filling in the spaces with mayonnaise, as he liked to call it. Whatever that meant.

It was bizarre to see them as people. A part of me was actually disappointed. My gods were regular humans who squabbled, laughed, got on one another's nerves, and—in Abraham's case—snored when they slept. Loudly.

"Now, *that's* the right look of concentration," Cody said. "Nice work, lad. Y'all've got to keep a keen mind. Focused. Like Sir William himself. Soul of a warrior." He took a bite of his sandwich.

I hadn't been focused on my tensor, but I didn't let on to that fact. Instead I raised my hand, doing as I'd been instructed. The thin glove I wore had lines of metal along the front of each finger. The lines joined in a pattern at the palm and all glowed softly green.

As I concentrated my hand began to vibrate softly, as if someone were playing music with a lot of bass somewhere

nearby. It was hard to focus with that strange pulsation running up my arm.

I raised my hand toward the chunk of metal; it was the remnant of a section of pipe. Now, apparently, I needed to *push* the vibrations away from me. Whatever that meant. The technology hooked right into my nerves using sensors inside the glove, interpreting electrical impulses from my brain. So Abraham had explained.

Cody had said it was magic, and had told me not to ask any questions lest I "anger the wee daemons inside who make the gloves work and our coffee taste good."

I still hadn't managed to make the tensors do anything, though I felt I was getting close. I had to remain focused, keep my hands steady, and *push* the vibrations out. Like blowing a ring of smoke, Abraham had said. Or like using your body warmth in a hug—without the arms. That had been Tia's explanation. Everyone thought of it their own way, I guess.

My hand started to shake more vigorously.

"Steady," Cody said. "Don't lose control, lad."

I stiffened my muscles.

"Whoa. Not too stiff," Cody said. "Secure, strong, but calm. Like you're caressing a beautiful woman, remember?"

That made me think of Megan.

I lost control, and a green wave of smoky energy burst from my hand and flew out in front of me. It missed the pipe completely, but vaporized the metal leg of the chair it sat on. Dust showered down and the chair went lopsided, dumping the pipe to the floor with a *clang*.

"Sparks," Cody said. "Remind me to never let you caress me, lad."

"I thought you told him to think of a beautiful woman," Tia said.

"Yeah," Cody replied. "And if that's how he treats one of them, I don't want to *know* what he'd do to an ugly Scotsman."

"I did it!" I exclaimed, pointing at the powdered metal that was the remains of the chair leg.

"Yeah, but you missed."

"Doesn't matter," I said. "I finally made it work!" I hesitated. "It wasn't like blowing smoke. It was like … like singing. From my hand."

“That’s a new one,” Cody said.

“It’s different for everyone,” Tia said from her table, head still down. She opened a can of cola as she scribbled notes. Tia was useless without her cola. “Using the tensors isn’t natural to your mind, David. You’ve already built neural pathways, and so you have to kind of hotwire your brain to figure out what mental muscles to flex. I’ve always wondered if we gave a tensor to a child, if they’d be able to incorporate using it better, more naturally, as just another kind of ‘limb’ to practice with.”

Cody looked at me. Then he whispered, “Wee daemons. Don’t let her fool you, lad. I think she works for them. I saw her leaving out pie for them the other night.”

Trouble was, he was *just* serious enough to make me question whether he really believed that. The twinkle to his eye indicated he was being silly, but he had such a perfectly straight face.…

I took off the tensor and handed it over. Cody slipped it on, then absently raised a hand—palm first—to the side and thrust it outward. The tensor began vibrating as his hand moved, and when it stopped a faint, smoky green wave continued on, hitting the fallen chair and the pipe. Both vaporized to dust, falling to the ground in a puff.

Each time I saw the tensors work, I was amazed. The range was very limited, only a few feet at most, and they couldn’t affect flesh. They weren’t much good in a fight—sure, you could vaporize someone’s gun, but only if they were very close to you. In which case taking the time to concentrate and fight with the tensors would probably be less effective than just punching the guy.

Still, the opportunities they afforded were incredible. Moving through the bowels of Newcago’s steel catacombs, getting in and out of rooms. If you managed to keep the tensor hidden, you could escape from any bond, any cell.

“You keep training,” Cody said. “You show talent, so Prof will want you to get good with these. We need another member of the team who can use them.”

“Not all of you can?” I asked, surprised.

Cody shook his head. “Megan can’t make them work, and Tia’s rarely in a position to use them—we need her back giving support while on missions. So it usually comes down to Abraham and me using them.”

“What about Prof?” I asked. “He invented them. He’s got to be pretty good with them, right?”

Cody shook his head. “Don’t know. He refuses to use them. Something about a bad experience in the past. He won’t talk about it. Probably shouldn’t. We don’t need to know. Either way, you should practice.” Cody shook his head and took off the tensor, tucking it into his pocket. “What I’d have given for one of these before….”

The other pieces of Reckoner technology were awesome too. The jackets, which supposedly worked a little like armor, were one. Cody, Megan, and Abraham each wore a jacket—different on the outside, but with a complicated network of diodes inside that somehow protected them. The dowser, which told if someone was Epic, was another piece of such technology. The only other piece I’d seen was something they called the harmsway, a device that accelerated a body’s healing abilities.

It’s so sad, I thought, as Cody fetched a broom to clean up the dust. *All of this technology … it could have changed the world. If the Epics hadn’t done that first*. A ruined world couldn’t enjoy the benefits.

“What was your life like back then?” I asked, holding the dustpan for Cody. “Before all of this happened? What did you do?”

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Cody said, smiling.

“Let me guess,” I said, anticipating one of Cody’s stories. “Professional footballer? High-paid assassin and spy?”

“A cop,” Cody said, subdued, looking down at the pile of dust. “In Nashville.”

“What? Really?” I *was* surprised.

Cody nodded, then waved for me to dump the first pile of dust into the trash bin while he swept up the rest of it. “My father was a cop too in his early years, over in the homeland. Small city. You wouldn’t know it. He moved here when he married my mother. I grew up over here; ain’t never actually been to the homeland. But I wanted to be just like my pa, so when he died, I went to school and joined the force.”

“Huh,” I said, stooping down again to collect the rest of the dust. “That’s a lot less glamorous than I’d been imagining.”

“Well, I did take down an entire drug cartel by myself, you understand.”

"Of course."

"And there was the time the president's Secret Service were shuttling him through the city, and they all ate a bad mess of scones and got sick, and we in the department had to protect him from an assassination plot." He called over to Abraham, who was tinkering with one of the team's shotguns. "It was them Frenchies who were behind it, you know."

"I'm not French!" Abraham called back. "I'm Canadian, you slontze."

"Same difference!" Cody said, then grinned and looked back at me. "Anyway, maybe it wasn't glamorous. Not all the time. But I enjoyed it. I like doing good for people. Serve and protect. And then …"

"Then?" I asked.

"Nashville got annexed when the country collapsed," Cody explained. "A group of five Epics took charge of most of the South."

"The Coven," I said, nodding. "There's actually six of them. One pair are twins."

"Ah, right. Keep forgetting that y'all are freakishly informed about this stuff. Anyway, they took over, and the police department started serving them. If we didn't agree, we were supposed to turn in our badges and retire. The good ones did that. The bad ones stayed on, and they got worse."

"And you?" I asked.

Cody fingered the thing he kept at his waist, tied to his belt on the right side. It looked like a thin wallet. He reached down and undid the snap, showing a scratched—but still polished—police badge.

"I didn't do either one," he said, subdued. "I took an oath. Serve and protect. I ain't going to stop that because some thugs with magic powers start shoving everybody around. That's that."

His words gave me a chill. I stared at that badge, and my mind flipped over and over like a pancake on a griddle, trying to figure out this man. Trying to reconcile the joking, storytelling blowhard with the image of a police officer still on his beat. Still serving after the city government had fallen, after the precinct had been shut down, after everything had been taken from him.

The others probably have similar stories, I thought, glancing at Tia, who was busy working away, sipping her cola. What had

drawn her to fighting what most would call a hopeless battle, living a life of constant running, bringing justice to those the law should have condemned—but could not touch? What had drawn Abraham, Megan, the professor himself?

I looked back at Cody, who was moving to close his badge holder. There was something tucked behind the plastic opposite it in the holder—a picture of a woman, but with a section removed, a bar shape that had contained her eyes and much of her nose.

"Who was that?"

"Somebody special," Cody said.

"Who?"

He didn't answer, snapping the badge holder closed.

"It's better if we don't know, or ask, about each other's families," Tia said from the table. "Usually a stint in the Reckoners ends with death, but occasionally one of us gets captured. Better if we can't reveal anything about the others that will put their loved ones in danger."

"Oh," I said. "Yeah, that makes sense." It just wasn't something I'd have considered. I didn't have any loved ones left.

"How is it going there, lass?" Cody asked, sauntering over to the table. I joined him and saw that Tia had spread out lists of reports and ledgers.

"It's not going at all," Tia said with a grimace. She rubbed her eyes beneath her spectacles. "This is like trying to re-create a complex puzzle after being given only one piece."

"What are you doing?" I asked. I couldn't make sense of the ledgers any more than I'd been able to make sense of the maps.

"Steelheart was wounded that day," Tia said. "If your recollection is correct—"

"It is," I promised.

"People's memories fade," Cody said.

"Not mine," I said. "Not about this. Not about that day. I can tell you what color tie the mortgage man was wearing. I can tell you how many tellers there were. I could probably count the ceiling tiles in the bank for you. It's there, in my head. Burned there."

"All right," Tia said. "Well, if you *are* correct, then Steelheart was impervious for most of the fight and only harmed near the end. Something changed. I'm working through all possibilities—something about your father, the location, or the situation. The

most likely seems the possibility you mentioned, that the vault was involved. Perhaps something inside it weakened Steelheart, and once the vault was blown open it could affect him."

"So you're looking for a record of the bank vault's contents."

"Yes," Tia said. "But it's an impossible task. Most of the records would have been destroyed with the bank. Off-site records would have been stored on a server somewhere. First Union was hosted by a company known as Dorry Jones LLC. Most of their servers were located in Texas, but the building was burned down eight years back during the Ardra riots.

"That leaves the off chance that they had physical records or a digital backup at another branch, but that building housed the main offices, so the chances of that are slim. Other than that, I've been looking for patron lists—the rich or notable who were known to frequent the bank and have boxes in the vault. Perhaps they stored something in there that will be part of the public record. A strange rock, a specific symbol that Steelheart might have seen, something."

I looked at Cody. Servers? Hosted? What was she talking about? He shrugged.

The problem was, an Epic weakness could be just about anything. Tia mentioned symbols—there were some Epics who, if they saw a specific pattern, lost their powers for a few moments. Others were weakened by thinking certain thoughts, not eating certain foods, or eating the wrong foods. The weaknesses were more varied than the powers themselves.

"If we don't figure out this puzzle," Tia said, "the rest of the plan is useless. We're starting down a dangerous path, but we don't yet know if we'll be capable of doing what we need to at the end. That bothers me greatly, David. If you think of anything —*anything*—that could give me another lead to work on, speak of it."

"I will," I promised.

"Good," she said. "Otherwise, take Cody and *please* let me concentrate."

"You really should learn to do two things at once, lass," Cody said. "Like me."

"It's easy to both be a buffoon and make messes of things, Cody," she replied. "Putting those messes back together while dealing with said buffoon is a much more difficult prospect. Go

find something to shoot, or whatever it is you do."

"I thought I *was* doing whatever it is I do," he said absently. He stabbed a finger at a line on one of the pages, which looked like it listed clients of the bank. It read *Johnson Liberty Agency*.

"What are you—" Tia began, then cut herself off as she read the words.

"What?" I asked, reading the document. "Are those people who stored things at the bank?"

"No," Tia said. "This isn't a list of clients. It's a list of people the bank was paying. That's …"

"The name of their insurance company," Cody said, smirking.

"Calamity, Cody," Tia swore. "I hate you."

"I know you do, lass."

Oddly, both of them were smiling as they said it. Tia immediately began shuffling through papers, though she noticed —with a dry look—that Cody had left a smudged bit of mayonnaise from his sandwich on the paper where he'd pointed.

He took me by the shoulder and steered me away from the table.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"Insurance company," Cody said. "The people who First Union Bank paid piles of money to cover the stuff they had in their vault."

"So that insurance company …"

"Would have kept a detailed, day-by-day record of just what they were insuring," Cody said with a grin. "Insurance people are a wee bit anal about things like that. Like bankers. Like Tia, actually. If we're lucky, the bank filed an insurance claim following the loss of the building. That would leave an additional paper trail."

"Clever," I said, impressed.

"Oh, I'm just good at finding things that are hovering around under my nose. I have keen eyes. I once caught a leprechaun, you know."

I looked at him skeptically. "Aren't those Irish?"

"Sure. He was over in the homeland on an exchange basis. We sent the Irish three turnips and a sheep's bladder in trade."

"Doesn't seem like much of a trade."

"Oh, I think it was a sparking good one, seeing as to how leprechauns are imaginary and all. Hello, Prof. How's your kilt?"

“As imaginary as your leprechaun, Cody,” Prof said, walking into the chamber from one of the side rooms, the one he’d appropriated as his “thinking room,” whatever that meant. It was the one with the imager in it, and the other Reckoners stayed away from it. “Can I borrow David?”

“Please, Prof,” Cody said, “we’re friends. You should know by now that you needn’t ask something like that … you should be *well* aware of my standard charge for renting one of my minions. Three pounds and a bottle of whiskey.”

I wasn’t sure if I should be more insulted at being called a minion, or at the low price to rent me.

Prof ignored him, taking me by the arm. “I’m sending Abraham and Megan to Diamond’s place today.”

“The weapons dealer?” I asked, eager. They’d mentioned that he might have some technology for sale that could help the Reckoners pretend to be an Epic. The “powers” manifested would have to be flashy and destructive, to get Steelheart’s attention.

“I want you to tag along,” Prof said. “It will be good experience for you. But follow orders—Abraham is in charge—and let me know if anyone you meet seems to recognize you.”

“I will.”

“Go get your gun, then. They’re leaving soon.”

15

“WHAT about the gun?” Abraham said as we walked. “The bank, the vault contents, those could be a false lead, could they not? What if there was something special about the gun that your father fired at him?”

“That gun was dropped by a random security officer,” I said. “Smith and Wesson M&P nine-millimeter, semiauto. There was nothing special about it.”

“You remember the *exact gun*?”

I kicked a bit of trash as we walked through the steel-walled underground tunnel. “As I said, I remember that day. Besides, I know guns.” I hesitated, then admitted more. “When I was young, I assumed the type of gun must have been special. I saved up, planning to buy one, but nobody would sell to a kid my age. I was planning to sneak into the palace and shoot him.”

“Sneak into the palace,” Abraham said flatly.

“Uh, yes.”

“And shoot *Steelheart*.”

“I was ten,” I said. “Give me a little credit.”

“To a boy with aspirations like that, I would extend my respect —but not credit. Or life insurance.” Abraham sounded amused. “You are an interesting man, David Charleston, but you sound like you were an even *more* interesting child.”

I smiled. There was something invitingly friendly about this soft-spoken, articulate Canadian, with his light French accent. You almost didn’t notice the enormous machine gun—with mounted grenade launcher—resting on his shoulder.

We were still in the steel catacombs, where even such a high

level of armament didn't draw particular attention. We passed occasional groups of people huddled around burning fires or heaters plugged into pirated electrical jacks. More than a few of the people we passed carried assault rifles.

Over the last few days I'd ventured out of the hideout a couple times, always in the company of one of the other Reckoners. The babysitting bothered me, but I got it. I couldn't exactly hope for them to trust me yet. Not completely. Besides—though I would never admit it out loud—I didn't want to walk the steel catacombs alone.

I'd avoided these depths for years. At the Factory they told stories about the depraved people—terrible monsters—who lived down here. Gangs that literally fed on the foolish who wandered into forgotten hallways, killing them and feasting on their flesh. Murderers, criminals, addicts. Not the normal sort of criminals and addicts we had up above, either. Specially depraved ones.

Perhaps those were exaggerations. The people we passed did seem dangerous—but more in a hostile way, not in an insane way. They watched with grim expressions and eyes that tracked your every movement until you passed out of their view.

These people wanted to be alone. They were the outcasts of the outcasts.

"Why does he let them live down here?" I asked as we passed another group.

Megan didn't respond—she was walking ahead of us, keeping to herself—but Abraham glanced over his shoulder, looking toward the firelight and the line of people who had stepped up to make sure we left.

"There will always be people like them," Abraham said. "Steelheart knows it. Tia, she thinks he made this place for them so he would know where they were. It is useful to know where your outcasts are gathering. Better the ones you know about than the ones you cannot anticipate."

That made me uncomfortable. I'd thought we were completely outside Steelheart's view down here. Perhaps this place wasn't as safe as I'd assumed.

"You cannot keep all men confined all the time," Abraham said, "not without creating a strong prison. So instead you allow some measure of freedom for those who really, really want it. That way, they do not become rebels. If you do it right."

“He did it wrong with us,” I said softly.

“Yes. Yes, indeed he did.”

I kept glancing back as we walked. I couldn’t shake the worry that some of those in the catacombs would attack us. They never did, though. They—

I started as I realized that at that moment, some of them *were* following us. “Abraham!” I said softly. “They’re following.”

“Yes,” he said calmly. “There are some waiting for us ahead too.”

In front of us the tunnel narrowed. Sure enough, a group of shadowed figures were standing there, waiting. They wore the mismatched cast-off clothing common to many catacombers, and they carried old rifles and pistols wrapped in leather—the type of guns that probably only worked one day out of two and had been carried by a dozen different people over the last ten years.

The three of us stopped walking, and the group behind caught up, boxing us in. I couldn’t see their faces. None carried mobiles, and it was dark without their glow.

“That’s some nice equipment, friend,” said one of the figures in the group in front of us. Nobody made any overtly hostile moves. They held their weapons with barrels pointed to the sides.

I carefully started to unsling my gun, my heart racing. Abraham, however, laid a hand on my shoulder. He carried his massive machine gun in his other hand, barrel pointed upward, and wore one of the Reckoner jackets, like Megan, though his was grey and white, with a high collar and several pockets, while hers was standard brown leather.

They always wore their jackets when they left the hideout. I’d never seen one work, and I didn’t know how much protection they could realistically offer.

“Be still,” Abraham said to me.

“But—”

“I will deal with this,” he said, his voice perfectly calm as he took a step forward.

Megan stepped up beside me, hand on the holster of her pistol. She didn’t look any calmer than I was, both of us trying to watch the people ahead and behind us at once.

“You like our equipment?” Abraham asked politely.

“You should leave the guns,” the thug said. “Continue on.”

“This would not make any sense,” Abraham said. “If I have

weapons that you want, the implication is that my firepower is greater than yours. If we were to fight, you would lose. You see? Your intimidation, it does not work."

"There are more of us than you, friend," the guy said softly. "And we're ready to die. Are you?"

I felt a chill at the back of my neck. No, these *weren't* the murderers I'd been led to believe lived down here. They were something more dangerous. Like a pack of wolves.

I could see it in them now, in the way they moved, in the way groups of them had watched us pass. These were outcasts, but outcasts who had banded together to become one. They no longer lived as individuals, but as a group.

And for this group, guns like the ones Abraham and Megan carried would increase their chances of survival. They'd take them, even if it meant losing some of their numbers. It looked to be about a dozen men and women against just three, and we were surrounded. They were terrible odds. I itched to lower my rifle and start shooting.

"You didn't ambush us," Abraham pointed out. "You hope to be able to end this without death."

The thieves didn't reply.

"It is very kind of you to offer us this chance," Abraham said, nodding to them. There was a strange sincerity to Abraham; from another person, words like those might have sounded condescending or sarcastic, but from him they sounded genuine. "You have let us pass several times, through territory you consider to be your own. For this also, I give you my thanks."

"The guns," the thug said.

"I cannot give them to you," Abraham said. "We need them. Beyond this, if we were to give them to you, it would go poorly for you and yours. Others would see them, and would desire them. Other gangs would seek to take them from you as you have sought to take them from us."

"That isn't for you to decide."

"Perhaps not. However, in respect of the honor you have shown us, I will offer you a deal. A duel, between you and me. Only one man need be shot. If we win, you will leave us be, and allow us to pass freely through this area in the future. If you win, my friends will deliver up their weapons, and you may take from my body that which you wish."

“These are the steel catacombs,” the man said. Some of his companions were whispering now, and he glared at them with shadowed eyes, then continued. “This is not a place of deals.”

“And yet, you already offered us one,” Abraham said calmly. “You did us honor. I trust that you will show it to us again.”

It didn’t seem to be about honor to me. They hadn’t ambushed us because they were afraid of us; they wanted the weapons, but they didn’t want a fight. They aimed to intimidate us instead.

The lead thug, however, finally nodded. “Fine,” he said. “A deal.” Then he quickly raised his rifle and fired. The bullet hit Abraham right in the chest.

I jumped, cursing as I scrambled for my gun.

But Abraham didn’t fall. He didn’t even twitch. Two more shots cracked in the narrow tunnel, bullets hitting him, one in the leg, one in the shoulder. Ignoring his powerful machine gun, he calmly reached to his side and took his handgun out of its holster, then shot the thug in the thigh.

The man cried out, dropping his battered rifle and collapsing, holding his wounded leg. Most of the others seemed too shocked to respond, though a few lowered their weapons nervously. Abraham casually reholstered his pistol.

I felt sweat trickle down my brow. The jacket seemed to be doing its job, and doing it better than I’d assumed. But I didn’t have one of those yet. If the other thugs opened fire …

Abraham handed his machine gun to Megan, then walked forward and knelt beside the fallen thug. “Place pressure here, please,” he said in a friendly tone, positioning the man’s hand on his thigh. “There, very good. Now if you don’t mind, I’ll bandage the wound. I shot you where the bullet could pass through the muscle, so it wouldn’t get lodged inside.”

The thug groaned at the pain as Abraham took out a bandage and wrapped the leg.

“You cannot kill us, friend,” Abraham continued, speaking more softly. “We are not what you thought us to be. Do you understand?”

The thug nodded vigorously.

“It would be wise to be our allies, do you not think?”

“Yes,” the thug said.

“Wonderful,” Abraham replied, tying the bandage tight. “Change that twice a day. Use boiled bandages.”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Abraham stood and took his gun back and turned to the rest of the thug’s group. “Thank you for letting us pass,” he said to the others.

They looked confused but parted, creating a path for us. Abraham walked forward and we followed in a hurry. I looked over my shoulder as the rest of the gang gathered around their fallen leader.

“That was *amazing*,” I said as we got farther away.

“No. It was a group of frightened people, defending what little they can lay claim to—their reputation. I feel bad for them.”

“They shot you. Three times.”

“I gave them permission.”

“Only after they threatened us!”

“And only after we violated their territory,” Abraham said. He handed his machine gun to Megan again, then took off his jacket as he walked. I could see that one of the bullets had penetrated it. Blood was seeping out around a hole in his shirt.

“The jacket didn’t stop them all?”

“They aren’t perfect,” Megan said as Abraham took off the shirt. “Mine fails all the time.”

We stopped as Abraham cleaned the wound with a handkerchief, then pulled out a little shard of metal. It was all that was left of the bullet, which had apparently disintegrated upon hitting his jacket. Only one little shard had made it through to his skin.

“What if he’d shot you in the face?” I asked.

“The jackets hide an advanced shielding device,” Abraham said. “It isn’t the jacket itself that protects, really, but the field the jacket extends. It offers some protection for the entire body, an invisible barrier to resist force.”

“What? Really? That’s amazing.”

“Yes.” Abraham hesitated, then pulled his shirt back on. “It probably would not have stopped a bullet to the face, however. So I am fortunate they did not choose to shoot me there.”

“As I said,” Megan interjected, “they are far from perfect.” She seemed annoyed with Abraham. “The shield works better with things like falls and crashes—bullets are so small and hit with so much velocity, the shields overload quickly. Any of those shots could have killed you, Abraham.”

“But they did not.”

“You still could have been hurt.” Megan’s voice was stern.

“I *was* hurt.”

She rolled her eyes. “You could have been hurt worse.”

“Or they could have opened fire,” he said, “and killed us all. It was a gamble that worked. Besides, I believe they now think we are Epics.”

“*I* almost thought you were one,” I admitted.

“Normally we keep this technology hidden,” Abraham said, putting on his jacket again. “People cannot wonder whether the Reckoners are Epics; it would undermine what we stand for. However, in this case, I believe it will go well for us. Your plan calls for there to be rumors of new Epics in the city, working against Steelheart. These men will hopefully spread that rumor.”

“I guess,” I said. “It was a good move, Abraham, but *sparks*. For a moment, I thought we were dead.”

“People rarely want to kill, David,” Abraham said calmly. “It’s not basic to the makeup of the healthy human mind. In most situations they will go to great lengths to avoid killing. Remember that, and it will help you.”

“I’ve seen a lot of people kill,” I replied.

“Yes, and that will tell you something. Either they felt they had no choice—in which case, if you could give them another choice, they would likely have taken it—or they were not of healthy mind.”

“And Epics?”

Abraham reached to his neck and fingered the small silver necklace he wore there. “Epics are not human.”

I nodded. With that, I agreed.

“I believe our conversation was interrupted,” Abraham said, taking his gun from Megan and casually resting it on his shoulder as we walked onward. “How did Steelheart get wounded? It *could* have been the weapon your father used. You never tried your brave plan of finding an identical gun, then doing … what was it you said? Sneaking into Steelheart’s palace and shooting him?”

“No, I didn’t get to try it,” I said, blushing. “I came to my senses. I don’t think it was the gun, though. M&P nine-millimeters aren’t exactly uncommon. Someone’s *got* to have tried shooting him with one. Besides, I’ve never heard of an Epic whose weakness was being shot by a specific caliber of bullet or make of

gun."

"Perhaps," Abraham said, "but many Epic weaknesses do not make sense. It could have something to do with that specific gun manufacturer. Or instead, it could have something to do with the composition of the bullet. Many Epics are weak to specific alloys."

"True," I admitted. "But what would be different about that particular bullet that wasn't the same for all of the others fired at him?"

"I don't know," Abraham said. "But it is worth considering. What do *you* think caused his weakness?"

"Something in the vault, like Tia thinks," I said with only some measure of confidence. "Either that or something about the situation. Maybe my father's specific age let him get through—weird, I know, but there was an Epic in Germany who could only be hurt by someone who was thirty-seven exactly. Or maybe it was the number of people firing on him. Crossmark, an Epic down in Mexico, can only be hurt if five people are trying to kill her at once."

"It doesn't matter," Megan interrupted, turning around in the hallway and stopping in the tunnel to look at us. "You're never going to figure it out. His weakness could be virtually *anything*. Even with David's little story—assuming he didn't just make it up—there's no way of knowing."

Abraham and I stopped in place. Megan's face was red, and she seemed barely in control. After a week of her acting cold and professional, her anger was a big shock.

She spun around and kept walking. I glanced at Abraham, and he shrugged.

We continued on, but our conversation died. Megan quickened her pace when Abraham tried to catch up to her, and so we just left her to it. Both she and Abraham had been given directions to the weapons merchant, so she could guide us just as well as he could. Apparently this "Diamond" fellow was only going to be in town for a short time, and when he came he always set up shop in a different location.

We walked for a good hour through the twisting maze of catacombs before Megan stopped us at an intersection, her mobile illuminating her face as she checked the map Tia had uploaded to it.

Abraham took his mobile off the shoulder of his jacket and did the same. “Almost there,” he told me, pointing. “This way. At the end of this tunnel.”

“How well do we trust this guy?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Megan said. Her face had returned to its normal impassive mask.

Abraham nodded. “Best to never trust a weapons merchant, my friend. They all sell to both sides, and they are the only ones who win if a conflict continues indefinitely.”

“Both sides?” I asked. “He sells to Steelheart too?”

“He won’t admit it if you ask,” Abraham said, “but it is certain that he does. Even Steelheart knows not to harm a good weapons dealer. Kill or torture a man like Diamond, and future merchants won’t come here. Steelheart’s army will never have good technology compared to the neighbors. That’s not saying that Steelheart likes it—Diamond, he could never open his shop up in the overstreets. Down here, however, Steelheart will turn a blind eye, so long as his soldiers continue to get their equipment.”

“So … whatever we buy from him,” I said, “Steelheart will know about it.”

“No, no,” Abraham said. He seemed amused, as if I were asking questions about something incredibly simple, like the rules to hide-and-seek.

“Weapons merchants don’t talk about other clients,” Megan said. “As long as those clients live, at least.”

“Diamond arrived back in the city just yesterday,” Abraham said, leading the way down the tunnel. “He will be open for one week’s time. If we are first to get to him, we can see what he has before Steelheart’s people do. We can get an advantage this way, eh? Diamond, he often has very … interesting wares.”

All right, then, I thought. I guess it didn’t matter that Diamond was slime. I’d use any tool I could to get to Steelheart. Moral considerations had stopped bothering me years ago. Who had time for morals in a world like this?

We reached the corridor leading to Diamond’s shop. I expected guards, perhaps in full powered armor. The only person there, though, was a young girl in a yellow dress. She was lying on a blanket on the floor and drawing pictures on a piece of paper with a silver pen. She looked up at us and began chewing on the end of the pen.

Abraham politely handed the girl a small data chip, which she took and examined for a moment before tapping it on the side of her mobile.

“We are with Phaedrus,” Abraham said. “We have an appointment.”

“Go on,” the girl answered, tossing the chip back to him.

Abraham snatched it from the air, and we continued down the corridor. I glanced over my shoulder at the girl. “That’s not very strong security.”

“It’s always something new with Diamond,” Abraham said, smiling. “There is probably something elaborate behind the scenes—some kind of trap the girl can spring. It probably has to do with explosives. Diamond likes explosives.”

We turned a corner and stepped into heaven.

“Here we are,” Abraham announced.

16

DIAMOND'S shop wasn't set up in a room, but instead in one of the long corridors of the catacombs. I assumed that the other end of the corridor was either a dead end or had guards. The space was lit from above by portable lights that were almost blinding after the general darkness of the catacombs.

Those lights shone on guns—hundreds of them hung on the walls of the hallway. Beautiful polished steel and deep, muted blacks. Assault rifles. Handguns. Massive, electron-compressed beasts like the one Abraham carried, with full gravatonics. Old-style revolvers, grenades in stacks, *rocket launchers*.

I'd only ever owned two guns—my pistol and my rifle. The rifle was a good friend. I'd had her for three years now, and I'd come to rely on her a lot. She worked when I needed her. We had a great relationship—I cared for her, and she cared for me.

At the sight of Diamond's shop, though, I felt like a boy who'd only ever owned a single toy car and had just been offered a showroom full of Ferraris.

Abraham sauntered into the hallway. He didn't give the weapons much of a look. Megan entered and I followed on her heels, staring at the walls and their wares.

"Wow," I said. "It's like … a banana farm for guns."

"A banana farm," Megan said flatly.

"Sure. You know, how bananas grow from their trees and hang down and stuff?"

"Knees, you *suck* at metaphors."

I blushed. *An art gallery*, I thought. *I should have said "like an art gallery for guns." No, wait. If I said it that way, it would mean the*

gallery was intended for guns to come visit. A gallery of *guns, then?*

"How do you even know what bananas are?" Megan said quietly as Abraham greeted a portly man standing beside a blank portion of wall. This could only be Diamond. "Steelheart doesn't import from Latin America."

"My encyclopedias," I said, distracted. *A gallery of guns for the criminally destructive. I should have said that. That sounds impressive, doesn't it?* "Read them a few times. Some of it stuck."

"Encyclopedias."

"Yeah."

"Which you read 'a few times.' "

I stopped, realizing what I'd said. "Er. No. I mean, I just browsed them. You know, looking for pictures of guns. I—"

"You are such a nerd," she said, walking ahead to join Abraham. She sounded amused.

I sighed, then joined them and tried to get her attention to show off my new metaphor, but Abraham was introducing us.

"… new kid," he said, gesturing to me. "David."

Diamond nodded to me. He had on a brightly colored floral-pattern shirt, like people supposedly once wore in the tropics. Maybe that was where I'd gotten the whole banana metaphor. He had a white beard and long white hair, though he was balding at the front, and wore a huge smile that sparkled in his eyes.

"I assume," he said to Abraham, "you want to see what's new. What's exciting. You know, my—*ahem*—other clients haven't even been through here yet! You're the first. First picks!"

"And highest prices," Abraham said, turning to look at the wall of guns. "Death comes at such a premium these days."

"Says the man carrying an electron-compressed Manchester 451," Diamond said. "With gravatonics and a full grenade dock. Nice explosions on those. Little on the small side, but you can bounce them in really fun ways."

"Show us what you have," Abraham said politely, though his voice seemed strained. I could swear he had sounded more calm talking to the thugs who had shot him. Curious.

"I'm getting some things ready to show you," Diamond said. He had a smile like a parrot fish, which I've always assumed look like parrots, though I've never actually seen either. "Why don't you just have a look around? Browse a bit. Tell me what suits your fancy."

“Very well,” Abraham said. “Thank you.” He nodded to us—we knew what we were supposed to do. Look for anything out of the ordinary. A weapon that could cause a lot of destruction—destruction that could seem like the work of an Epic. If we were going to imitate one, we’d need something impressive.

Megan stepped up beside me, studying a machine gun that fired incendiary rounds.

“I’m *not* a nerd,” I hissed at her softly.

“Why does it matter?” she asked, her tone neutral. “There’s nothing wrong with being smart. In fact, if you *are* intelligent, you’ll be a stronger asset to the team.”

“I just … I … I just don’t like being called that. Besides, who ever heard of a nerd jumping from a moving jet and shooting an Epic in midair while plummeting toward the ground?”

“I’ve never heard of *anyone* doing that.”

“Phaedrus did it,” I said. “Execution of Redleaf, three years ago up in Canada.”

“That story was exaggerated,” Abraham said softly, walking by. “It was a helicopter. And it was all part of the plan—we were very careful. Now please, keep focused on our current task.”

I shut my mouth and began studying the weapons. Incendiary rounds were impressive, but not particularly original. That wasn’t flashy enough for us. In fact, any type of basic gun wouldn’t work—whether it shot bullets, rockets, or grenades, it wouldn’t be convincing. We needed something more like the energy weapons Enforcement had. A way to mimic an Epic’s innate firepower.

I moved down the hallway, and the weapons seemed to grow more unusual the farther I walked. I stopped beside a curious group of objects. They appeared to be innocent enough—a water bottle, a mobile phone, a pen. They were attached to the wall like the weapons.

“Ah … you are a discerning man, are you, David?”

I jumped, turning to see Diamond grinning behind me. How could a fat man move so quietly?

“What are they?” I asked.

“Advanced stealth explosives,” Diamond answered proudly. He reached up and tapped a section of the wall, and an image appeared on it. He had an imager hooked up here, apparently. It showed a water bottle sitting on a table. A businessman strolled past, looking at some papers in his hand. He set them on the

table, then twisted the cap off the water.

And exploded.

I jumped back.

"Ah," Diamond said. "I hope you appreciate the value of this footage—it's rare that I get good shots of a stealth explosive being deployed in the field. This one is quite remarkable. Notice how the explosion flung the body back but didn't damage too much nearby? That's important in a stealth explosive, particularly if the person to be assassinated might have valuable documents on them."

"That's disgusting," I said, turning away.

"We are in the business of death, young man."

"The video, I mean."

"He wasn't a very nice person, if it helps." I doubted that mattered to Diamond. He seemed affable as he tapped the wall. "Good explosion. I'll be honest—I half keep these to sell just because I like showing off that video. It's one of a kind."

"Do they all explode?" I asked, examining the innocent-looking devices.

"The pen is a detonator," Diamond said. "Click the back and you set off one of those little eraser devices next to it. They're universal blasting caps. Stick them close to something explosive, trigger them, and they can usually set it off. Depends on the substance, but they're programmed with some pretty advanced detection algorithms. They work on most explosive substances. Stick one of those to some guy's grenade, walk away, then click the pen."

"If you could clip one of those to his grenade," Megan said, approaching, "you could have just pulled the pin. Or better yet, shot him."

"It's not for every situation," Diamond said defensively. "But they can be *very* fun. What's better than detonating your enemy's own explosives when he's not expecting it?"

"Diamond," Abraham called from down the corridor. "Come tell me about this."

"Ah! Excellent choice. *Wonderful* explosions from that one …" He scuttled off.

I looked at the panel full of innocent yet deadly objects. Something about them felt very wrong to me. I'd killed men before, but I'd done it honestly. With a gun in my hands, and only

because I'd been forced to. I didn't have many philosophies about life, but one of them was something my father had taught me: never throw the first punch. If you have to throw the second, try to make sure they don't get up for a third.

"These *could* be useful," Megan said, arms still crossed. "Though I doubt that blowhard really understands what for."

"I know," I said, trying to redeem myself. "I mean, recording some poor guy's death like that? It was totally unprofessional."

"Actually, he sells explosives," she said, "so having a recording like that *is* professional of him. I suspect he has recordings of each of these weapons being fired, as we can't test them hands-on down here."

"Megan, that was a recording of some guy *blowing up*." I shook my head, revolted. "It was awful. You shouldn't show off stuff like that."

She hesitated, looking troubled about something. "Yes. Of course." She looked at me. "You never did explain why you were so bothered by being called a nerd."

"I told you. I don't like it because, you know, I want to do awesome stuff. And nerds don't—"

"That's not it," she said, staring at me coolly. *Sparks*, but her eyes were beautiful. "There's something deeper about it that bothers you, and you need to get over it. It's a weakness." She glanced at the water bottle, then turned and walked over to the thing Abraham was inspecting. It was some kind of bazooka.

I secured my rifle over my shoulder and stuck my hands in my pockets. It seemed that I was spending a lot of time lately getting lectured. I'd thought that leaving the Factory would end all of that, but I guess I should have known better.

I turned from Megan and Abraham and looked across at the wall nearest me. I was having trouble focusing on the guns, which was a first for me. My mind was working over what she'd asked. Why did being called a nerd bother me?

I walked over to her side.

"… don't know if it's what we want," Abraham was saying.

"But the explosions are *so big*," Diamond replied.

"It's because they took the smart ones away," I said softly to Megan.

I could feel her eyes on me, but I continued staring at the wall.

"A lot of kids at the Factory tried so hard to prove how smart

they were," I said quietly. "We had school, you know. You went to school half the day, worked the other half, unless you got expelled. If you did poorly the teacher just expelled you, and after that you worked full days. School was easier than the Factory, so most of the kids tried really hard.

"The smart ones, though … the really smart ones … the nerds … they left. Got taken to the city above. If you showed some skill with computers, or math, or writing, off you went. They got good jobs, I hear. In Steelheart's propaganda corps or his accounting offices or something like that. When I was young I'd have laughed about Steelheart having accountants. He's got a lot of them, you know. You need people like them in an empire."

Megan looked at me, curious. "So you …"

"Learned to be dumb," I said. "Rather, to be mediocre. The dumb ones got kicked out of school, and I wanted to learn—knew I *needed* to learn—so I had to stay. I also knew that if I went up above, I'd lose my freedom. He keeps a lot better watch over his accountants than he does his factory workers.

"There were other boys like me. A lot of the girls moved on fast, the smart ones. Some of the boys I knew, though, they started to see it as a mark of pride that they weren't taken above. You didn't want to be one of the smart ones. I had to be extra careful, since I asked so many questions about the Epics. I had to hide my notebooks, find ways to throw off those who thought I was smart."

"But you're not there anymore. You're with the Reckoners. So it doesn't matter."

"It does," I said. "Because it's not who I am. I'm not smart, I'm just persistent. My friends who were smart, they didn't have to study at all. I had to study like a horse for every test I took."

"Like a horse?"

"You know. Because horses work hard? Pulling carts and plows and things?"

"Yeah, I'll just ignore that one."

"I'm *not* smart," I said.

I didn't mention that part of the reason I had to study so hard was because I needed to know the answer to each and every question perfectly. Only then could I ensure that I would get the *exact* number of questions wrong to remain in the middle of the pack. Smart enough to stay in school, but not worthy of notice or

attention.

"Besides," I continued. "The people I knew who were really smart, they learned because they loved it. I didn't. I hated studying."

"You read the encyclopedia. *A few times*."

"Looking for things that could be Epic weaknesses," I said. "I needed to know different types of metal, chemical compounds, elements, and symbols. Practically anything could be a weakness. I hoped something would spark in my head. Something about him."

"So it's all about him."

"Everything in my life is about him, Megan," I said, looking at her. "Everything."

We fell silent, though Diamond continued blabbing on. Abraham had turned to look at me. He seemed thoughtful.

Great, I realized. *He heard. Just great.*

"That will be enough, please, Diamond," Abraham said. "That weapon really won't work."

The weapons merchant sighed. "Very well. But perhaps you can give me a clue as to what *might* work."

"Something distinctive," Abraham said. "Something nobody has seen before, but also something destructive."

"Well, I don't have much that *isn't* destructive," Diamond said. "But distinctive … Let me see.…"

Abraham waved for us to keep searching. As Megan moved off, however, he took me by the arm. He had quite a strong grip. "Steelheart takes the smart ones," Abraham said softly, "because he fears them. He knows, David. All of these guns, they do not frighten him. They won't be what overthrows him. It will be the person clever enough, *smart* enough, to figure out the chink in his armor. He knows he can't kill them all, so he employs them. When he dies it will be because of someone like you. Remember that."

He released my arm and walked after Diamond.

I watched him go, then walked over to another group of weapons. His words didn't really change anything, but oddly, I did feel myself standing a little taller as I looked at a line of guns and was able to identify each of the manufacturers.

I'm totally not a nerd though. I still know the truth at least.

I looked over the guns for a few minutes, proud of how many I

could identify. Unfortunately none of them seemed distinctive enough. Actually, the fact that I could identify them guaranteed that they weren't distinctive enough. We needed something nobody had seen before.

Maybe he won't have anything, I thought. *If he has a rotating stock, then we may have picked the wrong time to visit. Sometimes a grab bag doesn't give anything worthwhile. It—*

I stopped as I noticed something different. Motorcycles.

There were three of them in a row near the far side of the hallway. I hadn't seen them at first, as I'd been focused on the guns. They were sleek, their bodies a deep green with black patterns running up their sides. They made me want to hunch over and crouch down to make myself have less wind resistance. I could imagine shooting through the streets on one of these. They looked so dangerous, like alligators. Really fast alligators wearing black. Ninja alligators.

I decided not to use that one on Megan.

They didn't have any weapons on them that I could see, though there were some odd devices on the sides. Maybe energy weapons? They didn't seem to fit with much of what Diamond had here, but then again, what he had was pretty eclectic.

Megan walked past me and I raised a finger to point at the motorcycles.

"No," she said, not even looking.

"But—"

"No."

"But they're awesome!" I said, holding up my hands, as if that should have been enough of an argument. And, sparks, it should have been. They were *awesome*!

"You could barely drive some lady's sedan, Knees," Megan said. "I don't want to see you on the back of something with gravatonics."

"Gravatonics!" That was even *more* awesome.

"No," Megan said firmly.

I looked toward Abraham, who was inspecting something nearby. He glanced at me, then over at the bikes, and smiled. "No."

I sighed. Wasn't shopping for weapons supposed to be more fun than this?

"Diamond," Abraham called to the dealer. "What is this?"

The weapons merchant began waddling over. “Oh, it’s wonderful. Great explosions. It …” His face fell as he neared and saw what Abraham was actually looking at. “Oh. That. Um, it is *quite* wonderful, though I don’t know if it would suit your needs. …”

The item in question was a large rifle with a very long barrel and a scope on top. It looked a little bit like an AWM—one of the sniper rifles the Factory had used as a model in building their products. The barrel was larger, however, and there were some odd coils around the forestock. It was painted a dark black-green and had a big hole where the magazine should have fit.

Diamond sighed. “This weapon is wonderful, but you are a good customer. I should warn you that I don’t have the resources to make it work.”

“What?” Megan asked. “You’re selling a broken gun?”

“It’s not that,” Diamond said, tapping the section of wall beside the gun. An image displayed of a man set up on the ground, holding the rifle and looking through the scope at some run-down buildings. “This is called a gauss gun, developed using research on some Epic or another who throws bullets at people.”

“Rick O’Shea,” I said, nodding. “An Irish Epic.”

“That’s really his name?” Abraham asked softly.

“Yeah.”

“That’s horrible.” He shivered. “Taking a beautiful French word and turning it into … into something Cody would say. *Câlice!*”

“Anyway,” I said. “He can make objects unstable by touching them; then they explode when subjected to any significant impact. Basically he charges rocks with energy, throws them at people, and they explode. Standard kinetic energy Epic.”

I was more interested in the idea that the technology had been developed based on his powers. Ricky was a newer Epic. He wouldn’t have been around back in the old days when, as the Reckoners had explained, Epics had been imprisoned and experimented on. Did this mean that kind of research was still going on? There was a place where Epics were being held captive? I’d never heard of such a thing.

“The gun?” Abraham asked Diamond.

“Well, like I said.” Diamond tapped the wall and the video started playing. “It’s a type of gauss gun, only it uses a projectile that has been charged with energy first. The bullet, once turned

explosive, is propelled to extreme speeds using tiny magnets."

The man holding the gun in the video flipped a switch and the coils lit up green. He pulled the trigger and there was a *burst* of energy, though the thing seemed to have almost no recoil. A splash of green light spat from the front of the gun's barrel, leaving a line in the air. One of the distant buildings exploded, giving off a strange shower of green that seemed to warp the air.

"We're … not sure why it does that," Diamond admitted. "Or even how. The technology changes the bullet into a charged explosive."

I felt a shiver, thinking about the tensors, the jackets—the technology used by the Reckoners. Actually, a lot of the technology we now used had come with the advent of the Epics. How much of it did we really understand?

We were relying on half-understood technology built from studying mystifying creatures who didn't even know how they did what they did themselves. We were like deaf people trying to dance to a beat we couldn't hear, long after the music actually stopped. Or … wait. I don't know what that actually was supposed to mean.

Anyway, the lights given off by that gun's explosion were very distinctive. Beautiful, even. There didn't seem to be much debris, just some green smoke that still floated in the air. Almost as if the building had been transformed directly to energy.

Then it hit me. "Aurora borealis," I said, pointing. "It looks like the pictures I've seen of it."

"Destructive capability looks good," Megan said. "That building was almost completely knocked down by one shot."

Abraham nodded. "It might be what we need. However, Diamond, might I inquire about what you mentioned earlier? You said it didn't work."

"It works just fine," the merchant said quickly. "But it requires an energy pack to fire. A powerful one."

"How powerful?"

"Fifty-six KC," Diamond said, then hesitated. "Per shot."

Abraham whistled.

"Is that a lot?" Megan asked.

"Yeah," I said, in awe. "Like, several thousand standard fuel cells' worth."

"Usually," Diamond said, "you need to hook it up by cord to its

own power unit. You can't just plug this bad boy into a wall socket. The shots on this demo were fired using several six-inch cords running back to a dedicated generator." He looked up at the weapon. "I bought it hoping I could trade *a certain client* for some of his high-energy fuel cells, then be able to actually sell the weapon in working condition."

"Who knows about this weapon?" Abraham asked.

"Nobody," Diamond said. "I bought it directly from the lab that created it, and the man who made this video was in my employ. It's never been on the market. In fact, the researchers who developed it died a few months later—blew themselves up, poor fools. I guess that's what you get when you routinely build devices that supercharge matter."

"We'll take it," Abraham said.

"You will?" Diamond looked surprised, and then a smile crossed his face. "Well … what an excellent choice! I'm certain you'll be happy. But again, to clarify, this will *not* fire unless you find your own energy source. A very powerful one, likely one you won't be able to transport. Do you understand?"

"We will find one," Abraham said. "How much?"

"Twelve," Diamond said without missing a beat.

"You can't sell it to anyone else," Abraham said, "and you can't make it work. You'll be getting four. Thank you." Abraham got out a small box. He tapped it, and handed it over.

"And we want one of those pen exploder things thrown in," I said on a whim as I held my mobile up to the wall and downloaded the video of the gauss gun in action. I almost asked for one of the motorcycles, but figured that would *really* be pushing things.

"Very well," Diamond said, holding up the box Abraham had given him. What *was* that, anyway? "Is Fortuity in here?" he asked.

"Alas," Abraham said, "our encounter with him did not leave time for proper harvesting. But four others, including Absence."

Harvesting? What did *that* mean? Absence was an Epic the Reckoners had killed last year.

Diamond grunted. I found myself *very* curious as to what was in that box.

"Also, here." Abraham handed over a data chip.

Diamond smiled, taking it. "You know how to sweeten a deal,

Abraham. Yes you do."

"Nobody finds out that we have this," Abraham said, nodding toward the gun. "Do not even tell another person that it exists."

"Of course not," Diamond said, sounding offended. He walked over to pull a standard rifle bag out from under his desk, then began to get the gauss gun down.

"What did we pay him with?" I asked Megan, speaking very softly.

"When Epics die, something happens to their bodies," she replied.

"Mitochondrial mutation." I nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, when we kill an Epic, we harvest some of their mitochondria," she said. "It's needed by the scientists who build all this kind of stuff. Diamond can trade it to secret research labs."

I whistled softly. "Wow."

"Yeah," she said, looking troubled. "The cells expire after just a few minutes if you don't freeze them, so that makes it hard to harvest. There are some groups out there who make a living harvesting cells—they don't kill the Epics, they just sneak a blood sample and freeze it. This sort of thing has become a secret, high-level currency."

So *that* was how it was happening. The Epics didn't even need to know about it. It worried me more deeply, however, to learn about this. How much of the process did we understand? What would the Epics think of their genetic material being sold at market?

I'd never heard of any of this, despite my research into Epics. It served as a reminder. I might have figured a few things out, but there was an entire world out there beyond my experience.

"What about the data chip Abraham gave him?" I asked. "The thing Diamond called a deal sweetener?"

"That has explosions on it," she said.

"Ah. Of course."

"Why do you want that detonator?"

"I don't know," I said. "It just sounded fun. And since it looks like a while till I'll get one of those bikes—"

"You'll *never* get one of those bikes."

"—I thought I'd ask for something."

She didn't reply, though it seemed as if I'd unintentionally

annoyed her. Again. I was having a tough time deciding what was bothering her—she seemed to have her own special rules for what constituted being "professional" and what didn't.

Diamond packed up the gun and, to my delight, tossed in the pen detonator and a small pack of the "erasers" that worked with it. I was feeling pretty good about getting something extra. Then I smelled garlic.

I frowned. It wasn't *quite* garlic, but it was close. What was …

Garlic.

Phosphorus smelled like garlic.

"We're in trouble," I said immediately. "Nightwielder is here."

17

“THAT’S impossible!” Diamond said, checking his mobile. “They’re not supposed to be here for another hour or two.” He paused, then held his ear—he wore a small earpiece—his mobile twinkling in his hand.

He grew pale, likely getting news of an early arrival from the girl outside. “Oh dear.”

“Sparks,” Megan said, slinging the gauss gun’s bag over her shoulder.

“You had an appointment with Steelheart *today*?” Abraham said.

“It won’t be him,” Diamond said. “Assuming he were a client of mine, he would never come himself.”

“He just sends Nightwielder,” I said, sniffing the air. “Yeah, he’s here. Can you smell that?”

“Why didn’t you warn us?” Megan said to Diamond.

“I don’t speak of other clients to—”

“Never mind,” Abraham said. “We leave.” He pointed down the hallway, opposite the way we’d come in. “Where does it lead?”

“Dead end,” Diamond said.

“You left yourself without a way out?” I asked, incredulous.

“Nobody would attack me!” Diamond said. “Not with the hardware I’ve got in here. Calamity! This is *not* supposed to happen. My clients know not to arrive early.”

“Stop him outside,” Abraham said.

“Stop Nightwielder?” Diamond asked, incredulous. “He’s incorporeal. He can walk through walls for Calamity’s sake.”

“Then keep him from walking all the way down the hallway,”

Abraham said calmly. “There are some shadows back there. We’ll hide.”

“I don’t—” Diamond started.

“There isn’t time to argue, my friend,” Abraham said. “Everyone pretends to not care that you sell to all sides, but I doubt Nightwielder will treat you well if he discovers us here. He’ll recognize me; he’s seen me before. If he finds me here, we all die. Do you understand?”

Diamond, still pale, nodded again.

“Come on,” Abraham said, shouldering his gun and jogging down the hallway past the rear of the store. Megan and I joined him. My heart was thumping. Nightwielder would recognize Abraham? What history did they have together?

There were piles of crates and boxes at the other end of the hallway. It was indeed a dead end, but there were no lights. Abraham waved for us to take cover behind the boxes. We could still see the walls full of weapons back where we’d been. Diamond stood there, wringing his hands.

“Here,” Abraham said, setting his large gun down on a box and aiming it directly at Diamond. “Man this, David. Don’t fire unless you *must*.”

“Won’t work against Nightwielder anyway,” I said. “He has prime invincibility—bullets, energy weapons, explosions all pass through him.” Unless we could get him into the sunlight, assuming I was right. I put up a good front for the others, but the truth was, all I had was hearsay.

Abraham dug in the pocket of his cargo pants and pulled something out. One of the tensors.

I immediately felt a surge of relief. He was going to cut us a path to freedom. “So we’re not going to wait it out?”

“Of course not,” he said calmly. “I feel like a rat in a trap. Megan, contact Tia. We need to know the tunnel nearest to this one. I’ll dig us a route to it.”

Megan nodded, kneeling down and cupping her mouth as she whispered into her mobile. Abraham warmed up the tensor, and I folded out the scope on his machine gun, flipping the switch to burst mode. He nodded appreciatively at the move.

I sighted through the scope. It was a nice one, far nicer than my own, with distance readouts, wind speed monitors, and optional low-light compensators. I had a pretty good view of

Diamond as he welcomed his new customers with hands open and a wide smile on his face.

I grew tense. There were eight of them—two men and a woman in suits alongside four Enforcement soldiers. And Nightwielder. He was a tall Asian man who was only half there. Faint, incorporeal. He wore a fine suit, but the long jacket had an Eastern flair to it. His hair was short, and he walked with hands clasped behind his back.

My finger twitched toward the trigger. This creature was Steelheart's right-hand Epic, the source of the darkness that cut Newcago off from the sun and stars. Similar darkness stirred on the ground around him, sliding toward shadows and pooling there. He could kill with that, could make tendrils of that dark mist turn solid and spear a man.

Those—the incorporeity and the manipulation of that mist—were his only two known powers, but they were doozies. He could move through solid matter, and like all incorporeals, he could fly at a steady speed. He could make a room completely black, then spear you with that darkness. And he could hold an entire city in perpetual night. Many assumed that he dedicated most of his energies to this.

That had always worried me. If he weren't so busy keeping the city in darkness, he might have been as powerful as Steelheart himself. Either way, he'd be more than enough to handle the three of us, unprepared as we were.

He and two of his minions were in conversation with Diamond. I wished I could hear what they were saying. I hesitated, then pulled back from the scope. A lot of advanced guns had …

Yes. I flipped the switch on the side, activating the scope's directional sound amplifier. I pulled the earphone out of my mobile and waved it past the chip on the scope to pair it, then stuck it in my ear. I leaned in and aimed the scope right at the group. The receiver picked up what was being said.

"… is interested in specific kinds of weapons, this time," one of Nightwielder's minions was saying. She wore a pantsuit and had her black hair cut short up over her ears. "Our emperor is worried that our forces rely too much on the armor units for heavy support. What do you have for more mobile troops?"

"Er, plenty," Diamond said.

Sparks, but he looks nervous. He didn't glance at us, but he

fidgeted and looked as if he might be sweating. For a man who dealt in the underground weapons trade, he certainly seemed bad at handling stress.

Diamond glanced from the woman toward Nightwielder, whose hands were clasped behind his back. According to my notes, he rarely spoke directly during business interactions. He preferred to use minions. It was some kind of Japanese culture thing.

The conversation continued, and Nightwielder continued to stand straight-backed and silent. They didn't go look at the guns on the walls, even when Diamond hinted that they could. They made him bring the weapons to them, and one of the assistants always handled the inspection and the questions.

That's pretty handy, I thought, a bead of nervous sweat dripping down my temple. *He can focus on Diamond—study and think, without bothering to make conversation*.

"Got it," Megan whispered. I glanced back to see her twisting her mobile around, her hand shading its light, to show Abraham the map Tia had sent. Abraham had to lean in close to make anything out; she had the mobile's screen dimmed almost to black.

He grunted softly. "Seven feet straight back, a few degrees down. That's going to take a few minutes."

"You should get at it, then," Megan said.

"I'll need your help to pile out the dust."

Megan shuffled to the side and Abraham placed his hands against the back wall, near the ground, and engaged the tensor. A large disk of steel began to disintegrate beneath his touch, creating a tunnel we could crawl through. Megan began scooping up and moving the steel dust as Abraham concentrated.

I turned back to watching, trying to breathe as quietly as possible. The tensors didn't make much noise, just a soft buzzing. Hopefully nobody would notice.

"… master thinks that this weapon is of poor quality," the servant said, handing back a machine gun. "We are growing disappointed in your selection, merchant."

"Well, you want heavy gear, but no launchers. That's a difficult prospect to match. I—"

"What was in this place on the wall?" a soft, eerie voice asked. It sounded something like a loud whisper, faintly accented, yet piercing. It made me shiver.

Diamond stiffened. I shifted the view on the scope slightly. Nightwielder stood beside the wall of weapons. He was pointing toward an open space where hooks jutted from the wall—where the gauss gun had been.

"There was something here, was there not?" Nightwielder asked. He almost never spoke to someone directly like this. It didn't seem to be a good sign. "You only opened today. You have already had business?"

"I … don't discuss other clients," Diamond said. "You know this."

Nightwielder looked back at the wall. At that moment, Megan bumped a box as she was moving steel dust. It didn't make a loud noise—in fact, she didn't even seem to notice she'd done it. But Nightwielder swiveled his head in our direction. Diamond followed his gaze; the weapons merchant looked so nervous you could have turned milk into butter by sticking his hand in it.

"He's noticed us," I said softly.

"What?" Abraham said, still concentrating.

"Just … keep at it," I said, standing. "And stay quiet."

It was time for a little more improvising.

18

I shouldered Abraham's gun, ignoring Megan's soft curse. I trotted out from behind the boxes before she could restrain me, and at the last moment I remembered to pop the earpiece out of my ear and stow it.

As I left the shadows, Nightwielder's soldiers trained guns on me with quick motions. I felt a spike of anxiety, the prickling sensation of defenselessness. I hate it when people point guns at me … though I guess that makes me like pretty much everyone else.

I continued on. "Boss," I called, patting the weapon. "I got it working. Magazine comes out easily now."

Nightwielder's soldiers glanced toward him, as if looking for permission to shoot. The Epic clasped his hands behind his back, studying me with ethereal eyes. He didn't seem to notice, but his elbow brushed the wall and passed right through the solid steel.

He studied me but remained motionless. The goons didn't shoot. Good sign.

Come on, Diamond, I thought, trying to contain my nervousness. *Don't be an idiot. Say someth—*

"Was it the release pin?" Diamond asked.

"No, sir," I said. "The magazine was bent slightly on one side." I gave a respectful nod to Nightwielder and his flunkies, then moved over to set the gun in the spot on the wall. It fit, fortunately. I'd guessed it would, considering it was close to the same size as the gauss gun.

"Well, Diamond," Nightwielder's female attendant said. "Perhaps you can tell us of this new addition. It looks like it—"

"No," Nightwielder said softly. "I will hear it from the boy."

I froze, then turned around, nervous. "Sir?"

"Tell me about this gun," Nightwielder said.

"The boy's a new hire," Diamond said. "He doesn't—"

"It's all right, boss," I said. "That's a Manchester 451. The weapon is a powerhouse—fifty caliber, with electron-compressed magazines. Each holds eight hundred rounds. The select-fire system supports single shot, burst, and full auto capabilities. It has gravatonic recoil reduction for shoulder firing, with optional advanced magnitude scope including audio receiving, range finding, and a remote firing mechanism. It also includes the optional grenade launcher. Equipped rounds are armor-piercing incendiary, sir. You couldn't ask for a better gun."

Nightwielder nodded. "And this?" he said, pointing to the gun next to it.

My palms were sweating. I shoved them in my pockets. That was … it was a … Yes, I knew. "Browning M3919, sir. An inferior gun, but very good for the price. Also fifty caliber, but without the recoil suppression, the gravatonics, or the electron compression. It is excellent as a mounted weapon—with the advanced heat sinks on the barrel, it can fire around eight hundred rounds a minute. Over a mile effective range with remarkable accuracy."

The corridor fell still. Nightwielder regarded the gun, then turned to his minions and made a curt gesture. That nearly made me jump with alarm, but the others seemed to relax. I'd passed Nightwielder's test, apparently.

"We will want to see the Manchester," the woman said. "This is exactly what we are looking for; you should have mentioned it earlier."

"I … was embarrassed about the magazine sticking," Diamond said. "It's a known problem with Manchesters, I'm afraid. Every gun has its quirks. I've heard that if you file down one of the top edges of the magazine, it slides much more easily. Here, let me get that back down for you.…"

The conversation continued, but I was forgotten. I was able to step back to where I wouldn't be in the way. *Should I try to slip away?* I wondered. It would seem suspicious if I went to the back of the hallway again, wouldn't it? Sparks. It looked like they were going to buy Abraham's gun. I hoped he'd forgive me for that.

If Abraham and Megan got out through the hole, I could just wait here until Nightwielder left, then meet up with them. Staying put seemed like the best move for the moment.

I found myself staring at Nightwielder's back as his minions continued negotiations. I was … what, three steps away from him? One of Steelheart's three most trusted, one of the most powerful living Epics. He was right there. And I couldn't touch him. Well, I couldn't touch him literally, since he was incorporeal —but I meant figuratively too.

That was the way it had always been, ever since Calamity appeared. So few dared resist the Epics. I'd watched children be murdered in front of their parents, with nobody brave enough to lift a hand to try to stop it. Why would they try? They'd just be killed.

He did it to me too, to an extent. I was here with him, but all I wanted to do was escape. *You make us all selfish*, I thought at Nightwielder. *That's why I hate you. All of you.* But Steelheart most of all.

"… could use some better forensic tools," Nightwielder's female minion said. "I realize it's not your specialty."

"I always bring some along to Newcago," Diamond replied. "Just for you. Here, let me show you what I have."

I blinked. They were done with the conversation about the Manchester, and apparently they'd bought it—and ordered a shipment of three hundred more from Diamond, who'd happily made the sale even though this one wasn't his to sell.

Forensics …, I thought. Something about that itched at my memory.

Diamond waddled over to rummage under his desk for a few boxes. He noticed me and waved me away. "You can go back to the stockpile and continue your inventory, kid. I don't need you here any longer."

I should probably have done as he said, but I did something stupid instead. "I'm almost finished with that, boss," I said. "I'd like to stay, if I can. I still don't know a lot about the forensic equipment."

He stopped, studying me, and I tried my best to look innocent, hands stuffed in the pockets of my jacket. A little voice in my head was muttering, *You are so stupid, you are so stupid, you are so stupid.* But when was I going to get a chance like this again?

Forensic equipment would include the kinds of things one used for studying a crime scene. And I knew a little more about that sort of thing than I'd just implied to Diamond. I'd read about it, at least.

And I remembered that you could find DNA and fingerprints by shining UV light on them. UV light … the very thing my notes claimed was Nightwielder's weakness.

"Fine." Diamond went back to rummaging. "Just stay out of the Great One's way."

I took a few steps back and kept my eyes down. Nightwielder paid me no heed, and his minions stood with arms crossed as Diamond got out an array of boxes. He began asking what they needed, and I could soon tell from their responses that someone in the Newcago government—Nightwielder, maybe Steelheart himself—was troubled by Fortuity's assassination.

They wanted equipment to detect Epics. Diamond didn't have such a thing; he said he'd heard of some for sale in Denver, but it had turned out to be only a rumor. It appeared that dowsers like the Reckoners had weren't easy to come by even for someone like Diamond.

They also wanted equipment to better determine the origins of bullet shells and explosives. This request he could accommodate, particularly tracking down explosives. He unpacked several devices from their Styrofoam and cardboard, then showed a scanner that identified the chemicals in an explosive by analyzing the ash produced.

I waited, tense, as one of the minions picked up something that looked like a metal briefcase with locks on the sides. She flipped it open, revealing a bunch of smaller devices situated in foam holes. That looked just like the forensic kits I'd read about.

A small data chip was attached to the top, glowing faintly now that the case was open. That would be the manual. The minion waved her mobile in front of it absently, downloading the instructions. I stepped over and did likewise, and though she glanced at me, she soon dismissed me and turned back to her inspection.

My heart beating more quickly, I scanned through the manual's contents until I found it. UV fingerprint scanner with attached video camera. I skimmed the instructions. Now, if I could just get it out of the case.…

The woman took out a device and inspected it. It wasn't the fingerprint scanner, so I didn't pay attention. I snatched that scanner the second she looked away, and then I pretended to just be fiddling with it, trying my best to look idly curious.

In the process I got it turned on. It glowed blue at the front and had a screen on the back—it worked like a digital camcorder, but with a UV light on the front. You shined the light over objects and recorded images of what that revealed. That would be handy if doing a sweep of a room for DNA—it would give you a record of what you'd seen.

I turned on the record function. What I was about to do could easily get me killed. I'd seen men murdered for far less. But I knew Tia wanted stronger proof. It was time to get her some.

I turned the UV light and shined it on Nightwielder.

19

NIGHTWIELDER spun on me immediately.

I turned the UV light to the side, my head down as if I were studying the device and trying to figure out how it worked. I wanted it to seem like I'd shined the light on him by happenstance while fiddling with it.

I didn't look at Nightwielder. I *couldn't* look at Nightwielder. I didn't know if the light had worked on him, but if it had and he so much as suspected that I'd seen, I'd die.

I might die anyway.

It was painful not to know what effect the light had produced, but the device *was* recording. I turned away from Nightwielder, and with one hand I tapped some buttons on the device as if trying to make it work. With the other—fingers trembling nervously—I slid out the data chip and hid it in the palm of my hand.

Nightwielder was still watching me. I could feel his eyes, as if they were drilling holes into my back. The room seemed to grow darker, shadows lengthening. To the side, Diamond continued chatting about the features of the device he was demonstrating. Nobody seemed to have noticed that I'd drawn Nightwielder's attention.

I pretended not to notice either, though my heart was pounding even harder in my chest. I fiddled with the machine some more, then held it up as if I'd finally figured out how it worked. I stepped forward and pressed my thumb on the wall, then stepped back to try to see the thumbprint show up in the UV light.

Nightwielder hadn't moved. He was considering what to do.

Killing me would protect him if I'd noticed what the UV light did. He could do it. He could claim that I'd impinged on his personal space, or looked at him wrong. Sparks, he didn't even need to give an excuse. He could do what he wanted.

However, that could be dangerous for him. When an Epic killed erratically or unexpectedly, people always wondered if it was an attempt to hide their weakness. His minions had seen me holding a UV scanner. They might make a connection. And so, to be safe, he'd probably have to kill Diamond and the Enforcement soldiers as well. Probably his own assistants too.

I was sweating now. It felt awful to stand there, to not even be facing him as he considered murdering me. I wanted to spin, look him in the eyes, and spit at him as he killed me.

Steady, I told myself. Keeping the defiance from my face, I looked over and pretended to notice—for the first time—that Nightwielder was staring at me. He stood as he had earlier, hands behind his back, black suit and thin black necktie making him look all lines. Motionless gaze, translucent skin. There was no sign of what had happened, if indeed anything *had* happened.

Upon seeing him I jumped in shock. I didn't have to feign fear; I felt my skin grow pale, the color drain from my face. I dropped the fingerprint scanner and yelped softly. The scanner cracked as it hit the ground. I immediately cursed, crouching down beside the broken device.

"What are you doing, you fool!" Diamond bustled over to me. He didn't seem very worried about the scanner, more about my offending Nightwielder somehow. "I'm so sorry, Great One. He is a bumbling idiot, but he's the best I've been able to find. It—"

Diamond hushed as the shadows nearby lengthened, then swirled upon themselves, becoming thick black cords. He stumbled away and I jumped to my feet. The darkness didn't strike at me, however, but scooped up the fallen fingerprint scanner.

The blackness seemed to pool on the floor, writhing and twisting about itself. Tendrils of it raised the scanner up into the air in front of Nightwielder, and he studied it with an indifferent gaze. He looked to us, and then more of the blackness rose up and surrounded the scanner. There was a sudden *crunch*, like a hundred walnuts being cracked at once.

The intended message was clear. Annoy me, and you will meet

the same fate. Nightwielder neatly obscured his fear of the scanner, and his desire to destroy it, behind the guise of a simple threat.

"I …" I said softly. "Boss, why don't I just go to the back and keep working on that inventory, like you said?"

"What you should have done from the first," Diamond said. "Off with you."

I turned and scrambled away, hand held to my side, clutching the data chip from the UV scanner. I hurried my pace, not minding how I looked, until I was running. I reached the boxes and the relative safety of their shadows. There, close to the floor, I found a completed tunnel burrowed through the back wall.

I lurched to a stop. I took a breath, got on my hands and knees, and scrambled into the opening. I slid through the seven feet of steel and came out the other side.

Something grabbed my arm and I pulled back by instinct. I looked up, logic fleeing as I thought of how Nightwielder had made the shadows themselves come alive, but was relieved to see a familiar face.

"Hush!" Abraham said, holding my arm. "Are they chasing?"

"I don't think so," I said softly.

"Where's my gun?"

"Um … I kind of sold it to Nightwielder."

Abraham raised an eyebrow at me, then towed me to the side, where Megan covered us with my rifle. She was the definition of professional—lips a terse line, eyes searching the tunnels nearby for danger. The only light came from the mobiles she and Abraham wore strapped to their shoulders.

Abraham nodded to her, and there was no further conversation as the three of us made our escape down the corridor. At the next intersection of the catacombs, Megan tossed my rifle to Abraham —ignoring that I'd put my hand out for it—and unholstered one of her handguns. She nodded to him, then took point, hurrying ahead down the steel tunnel.

We continued that way, no talk, for a time. I'd been hopelessly lost before, but now I was turned around so much I barely knew which direction was up.

"Okay," Abraham finally said, holding up a hand to wave Megan back. "Let's take a breather and see if anyone is following." He settled down in a small alcove in the hallway

where he could watch the stretch behind us and see if anyone had followed. He seemed to be favoring the arm opposite the shoulder that had been shot.

I crouched beside him and Megan joined us.

"That was an unexpected move you made up there, David," Abraham said softly, calmly.

"I didn't have time to think about it," I said. "They heard us working."

"True, true. And then Diamond suggested you go back, but you said you wanted to stay?"

"So … you heard that?"

"I could not have just mentioned it if I hadn't." He continued looking down the hallway.

I glanced at Megan, who gave me a frosty stare. "Unprofessional," she muttered.

I fished in my pocket and brought out the data chip. Abraham glanced at it, then frowned. He obviously hadn't stayed long enough to see what I was doing with Nightwielder. I tapped the chip to my mobile, downloading the information. Three taps later, it started displaying the video from the UV scanner. Abraham glanced over, and even Megan craned her neck to see what it was showing.

I held my breath. I still didn't know for certain if I was right about Nightwielder—and even if I was, there was no telling whether my hasty spin of the scanner had captured any useable images.

The video image showed the ground, with me waving my hand in front of the lens. Then it turned on Nightwielder and my heart leaped. I tapped the screen, freezing the image.

"You clever little slontze," Abraham murmured. There, on the screen, Nightwielder stood with half his body fully corporeal. It was difficult to make out, but it was there. Where the UV light shone, he wasn't translucent, and his body seemed to have *settled* more.

I tapped the screen again and the UV light panned past, letting Nightwielder become incorporeal again. The video was only a second or two, but it was enough. "UV forensics scanner," I explained. "I figured this was the best chance we'd get to know for certain.…"

"I can't believe you took that chance," Megan said. "Without

asking anyone. You could have gotten *all three* of us killed."

"But he didn't," Abraham said, plucking the data chip from my hand. He studied it, seeming oddly reverent. Then he looked up, as if remembering he'd been planning to watch the hallway for signs of people following. "We need to get this chip to Prof. Now." He hesitated. "Nice work."

He stood up to go, and I found myself beaming. Then I turned to Megan, who gave me an even colder, more hostile look than she had earlier. She rose and followed Abraham.

Sparks, I thought. What would it take to impress that girl? I shook my head and jogged after them.

20

WHEN we returned, Cody was off on a mission to do some scouting for Tia. She waved toward some rations on the back table of the main room, awaiting devourment. Devouration. Whatever that word is.

"Go tell Prof what you found," Abraham said softly, walking toward the storage room. Megan made her way to the rations.

"Where are you going?" I asked Abraham.

"I need a new gun, it seems," he said with a smile, ducking through the doorway. He hadn't chided me for what I'd done with his gun—he saw that I'd saved the team. At least I hoped that was how he viewed it. Still, there was a distinct sense of loss in his voice. He'd liked that gun. And it was easy to see why—I'd *never* owned a weapon as nice as that one.

Prof wasn't in the main room, and Tia glanced at me, raising an eyebrow. "What are you telling Prof?"

"I'll explain," Megan said, sitting down beside her. As usual, Tia had her table covered with papers and cans of cola. It looked like she'd gotten the insurance records Cody mentioned, and she had them up on the screen in front of her.

If Prof wasn't in here, I figured he was probably in his thinking room with the imager. I walked over and knocked softly on the wall; the doorway was only draped with a cloth.

"Come in, David," Prof's voice called from inside.

I hesitated. I hadn't been in the room since I had told the team my plan. The others rarely entered. This was Prof's sanctum, and he usually came out—rather than inviting people in—when they needed to speak to him. I glanced at Tia and Megan, both of

whom looked surprised, though neither said anything.

I pushed past the cloth and stepped into the room. I'd imagined what Prof was doing with the wall imagers—maybe exploiting the team's hack of the spy network, moving through the city and studying Steelheart and his minions. It wasn't anything so dramatic.

"Chalkboards?" I asked.

Prof turned from the far wall, where he'd been standing and writing with a piece of chalk. All four walls, along with ceiling and floor, had been turned slate-black, and they were covered in white scribbled writing.

"I know," Prof said, waving me in. "It's not very modern, is it? I have technology capable of representing just about anything I want, in any form I want. And I choose chalkboards." He shook his head, as if in amusement at his own eccentricity. "I think best this way. Old habits, I guess."

I stepped up to him. I could see now that he wasn't actually writing on the walls. The thing in Prof's hand was just a little stylus shaped like a piece of chalk. The machine was interpreting his writings, making the words appear on the wall as he scribbled them.

The drape had fallen back into place, masking the light from the other rooms. I could barely make Prof out; the only light came from the soft glow of the white script on all six walls. I felt as if I were floating in space, the words *stars* and *galaxies* shining at me from distant abodes.

"What *is* this?" I asked, looking upward, reading the script that covered the ceiling. Prof had certain bits of it boxed away from others, and had arrows and lines pointing to different sections. I couldn't make much sense of what it said. It was written in English, kind of. But many of the words were very small and seemed to be in some kind of shorthand.

"The plan," Prof said absently. He didn't wear his goggles or coat—both sat in a pile beside the door—and the sleeves of his black button-up shirt were rolled to the elbows.

"My plan?" I asked.

Prof's smile was lit by the pale glowing chalk lines. "Not any longer. There are some seeds of it here, though."

I felt a sharp sinking feeling. "But, I mean …"

Prof glanced at me, then laid a hand on my shoulder. "You did

a great job, son. All things considered."

"What was wrong with it?" I asked. I'd spent years … really, my *entire life* on that plan, and I was pretty confident in what I'd come up with.

"Nothing, nothing," Prof said. "The ideas are sound. Remarkably so. Convince Steelheart that there's a rival in town, lure him out, hit him. Though there is the glaring fact that you don't know what his weakness is."

"Well, there is that," I admitted.

"Tia is working hard on it. If anyone can tease out the truth, it will be her," Prof said, then paused for a moment before he continued. "Actually, no—I shouldn't have said that this isn't your plan. It is, and there are more than just seeds of it here. I looked through your notebooks. You thought through things very well."

"Thank you."

"But your vision was too narrow, son." Prof removed his hand from my shoulder and walked up to the wall. He tapped it with his imitation chalk stylus, and the room's text rotated. He didn't appear to even notice, but I grew dizzy as the walls seemed to tumble about me, spinning until a new wall of text popped up in front of Prof.

"Let me start with this," he said. "Other than not specifically knowing Steelheart's weakness, what's the biggest flaw in your plan?"

"I …" I frowned. "Taking out Nightwielder, maybe? But Prof, we just—"

"Actually," Prof said, "that's not it."

My frown deepened. I hadn't thought there *was* a flaw in my plan. I'd worked all those out, smoothing them away like cleanser removing the pimples from a teenager's chin.

"Let's break it down," Prof said, raising his arm and sweeping an opening on the wall, like he was wiping mud from a window. The words scrunched to the side, not vanishing but bunching up like he'd pulled a new section of paper from a spool. He raised his chalk to the open space and started to write. "Step one, imitate a powerful Epic. Step two, start killing Steelheart's important Epics to make him worried. Step three, draw him out. Step four, kill him. By doing this you restore hope to the world and encourage people to fight back."

I nodded.

"Except there's a problem," Prof said, still scribbling on the wall. "If we *actually* manage to kill Steelheart, we'll have done it by imitating a powerful Epic. Everyone's going to assume, then, that an *Epic* was behind the defeat. And so, what do we gain?"

"We could announce it was the Reckoners after the fact."

Prof shook his head. "Wouldn't work. Nobody would believe us, not after all the trouble we'll need to go through to make Steelheart believe."

"Well, does it matter?" I asked. "He'll be dead." Then, more softly, I added, "And I get revenge."

Prof hesitated, chalk pausing on the wall. "Yes," he said. "I guess you'd still have that."

"You want him dead too," I said, stepping up beside him. "I know it. I can see it."

"I want all Epics dead."

"It's more than that," I said. "I've seen it in you."

He glanced at me, and his gaze grew stern. "That doesn't matter. It is *vital* that people know we were behind this. You've said it yourself—we can't kill every Epic out there. The Reckoners are spinning in circles. The only hope we have, the only hope that humankind has, is to convince people that we *can* fight back. For that to happen, Steelheart has to fall by human hands."

"But for him to come out, he has to believe an Epic is threatening him," I said.

"You see the problem?"

"I …" I was starting to. "So we're not going to imitate an Epic?"

"We are," Prof said. "I like the idea, the spark of that. I'm just pointing out problems we have to work through. If this … Limelight is going to kill Steelheart, we need a way to make certain that after the fact, we can convince people it was really us. Not impossible, but it is why I had to work more on the plan, expand it."

"Okay," I said, relaxing. So we were still on track. A false Epic … the soul of my plan was there.

"There's a bigger problem, unfortunately," Prof said, tapping his chalk against the wall. "Your plan calls for us to kill Epics in Steelheart's administration to threaten him and draw him out. You indicate that we should do this to prove that a new Epic has

come to town. Only, that's not going to work."

"What? Why?"

"Because it's what the Reckoners would do," Prof said. "Killing Epics quietly, never coming out into the open? It'll make him suspicious. We need to think like a *real* rival would. Anyone who wants Newcago would think bigger than that. Any Epic out there can have a city of his own; it's not that hard. To want Newcago, you'd have to be ambitious. You'd have to want to be a *king*. You'd have to want Epics at your beck and call. And so, killing them off one by one wouldn't make sense. You see?"

"You'd want them alive so they'd follow you," I said, slowly understanding. "Every Epic you kill would lessen your power once you actually took Newcago."

"Exactly," Prof said. "Nightwielder, Firefight, maybe Conflux … they'll have to go. But you'd be very careful who to kill and who to try to bribe away."

"Only we *can't* bribe them away," I said. "We wouldn't be able to convince them that we're an Epic, not long term."

"So you see another problem," Prof said.

He was right. I wilted, like soda going flat in a cup left out overnight. How had I not seen this hole in my plan?

"I've been working on these two problems," Prof said. "If we're going to imitate an Epic—and I think we still should—we need to be able to prove that we were behind it all along. That way the truth can flood Newcago and spread across the Fractured States from there. We can't just kill him; we have to film ourselves doing so. And we need to, at the last minute, send information about our plan to the right people around the city—so that they know and can vouch for us. People like Diamond, non-Epic crime magnates, people with influence but no direct connection to his government."

"Okay. But what about the second problem?"

"We need to hit Steelheart where it hurts," Prof said, "but we can't spread it out over too much time, and we can't focus on Epics. We need one or two massive hits that make him bleed, make him see us as a threat, and we need to do it as a rival seeking to take his place."

"So …"

Prof tapped the wall, rotating the text from the floor up in front of him. He tapped a section and some of the text started glowing

green.

"Green?" I said, amused. "What was that about liking things old-fashioned?"

"You can use colored chalk on a chalkboard," he said gruffly as he circled a pair of words: *sewage system*.

"Sewage system?" I said. I'd been expecting something a little more grand, and a little less … crappy.

Prof nodded. "The Reckoners never attack facilities; we focus only on Epics. If we hit one of the city's main points of infrastructure, it will make Steelheart believe it's not the Reckoners working against him, but some other force. Someone specifically trying to take down Steelheart's rule—either rebels in the city, or another Epic moving on his territory.

"Newcago works on two principles: fear and stability. The city has the basic infrastructure that many others don't, and that draws people here. The fear of Steelheart keeps them in line." He rolled the words on the walls again, bringing over a network of drawings he'd done in "chalk" on the far wall. It looked like a crude blueprint. "If we start attacking his infrastructure he'll move on us faster than if we'd attacked his Epics. Steelheart is smart. He knows why people come to Newcago. If he loses the basic things—sewage, power, communications—he'll lose the city."

I nodded slowly. "I wonder why."

"Why? I just explained…." Prof trailed off, looking at me. He frowned. "That's not what you mean."

"I wonder why he cares. Why does he go to so much trouble to create a city where people want to live? Why does he care if they have food, or water, or electricity? He kills them so callously, yet he also sees that they're provided for."

Prof fell silent. Eventually he shook his head. "What is it to be a king if you have nobody to follow you?"

I thought back to that day, the day when my father died. *These people are mine.…* As I considered it I realized something about the Epics. Something that, despite all my years of study, I'd never quite understood before.

"It isn't enough," Prof whispered. "It isn't *enough* to have godly powers, to be functionally immortal, to be able to bend the elements to your will and soar through the skies. It isn't enough unless you can use it to make others follow you. In a way, the

Epics would be nothing without the regular people. They need someone to dominate; they need some way to show off their powers."

"I hate him," I hissed, though I hadn't meant to say it out loud. I hadn't even realized I'd been thinking it.

Prof looked at me.

"What?" I asked. "Are you going to tell me that my anger doesn't do any good?" People had tried to tell me that in the past, Martha foremost among them. She claimed the thirst for vengeance would eat me alive.

"Your emotions are your own business, son," Prof said, turning away. "I don't care *why* you fight, so long as you do fight. Maybe your anger will burn you away, but better to burn yourself away than to shrivel up beneath Steelheart's thumb." He paused. "Besides, telling you to stop would be a little like a hearth telling the oven to cool down."

I nodded. He understood. He felt it too.

"Regardless, the plan is now realigned," Prof said. "We'll strike at the wastewater treatment plant, as it's the least well guarded. The trick will be making sure Steelheart connects the attack to a rival Epic, rather than just rebels."

"Would it be so bad if people thought there was a rebellion?"

"It wouldn't draw Steelheart out, for one," Prof said. "And if he thought the people were rebelling, he'd make them pay. I won't have innocents dying in retaliation for things we've done."

"But, I mean, isn't that the point? To show the others that we can fight back? Actually, as I think about it, maybe we could set up here in Newcago for good. If we win, maybe we could lead the place once—"

"Stop."

I frowned.

"We kill Epics, son," Prof said, his voice suddenly quiet, intense. "And we're good at it. But don't get it into your mind that we're revolutionaries, that we're going to tear down what's out there and put ourselves in its place. The *moment* we start to think like that, we derail.

"We want to make others fight back. We want to inspire them. But we dare not take that power for ourselves. That's the end of it. We're killers. We'll rip Steelheart from his place and find a way to pull his heart from his chest. After that, let someone else

decide what to do with the city. I want no part of it."

The ferocity of those words, soft though they were, quieted me. I didn't know how to respond. Maybe Prof did have a point, though. This was about killing Steelheart. We had to stay focused.

It still felt odd that he hadn't challenged me on my passion for vengeance. He was pretty much the first person who hadn't served me some platitude on revenge.

"Fine," I said. "But I think the sewage station is the wrong place to hit."

"Where would you go?"

"The power station."

"Too well guarded." Prof examined his notes, and I could see that he had a schematic of the power station as well, with notations around the perimeter. He'd considered it.

I got a thrill from the idea that the two of us thought along the same lines.

"If it's well guarded," I said, "then blowing it up will look that much more impressive. And we could steal one of Steelheart's power cells while we're there. We brought back a gun from Diamond, but it's dry. It needs a powerful energy source to run." I raised my mobile to the wall and uploaded the video of the gauss gun firing. The video appeared on the wall, shoving aside some of Prof's chalk writings, and played.

He watched in silence, and when it was done he nodded. "So our fake Epic will have energy powers."

"And that's why he'd destroy the power station," I said. "It's in theme." Epics liked themes and motifs.

"It's too bad that removing the power station wouldn't stop Enforcement," Prof said. "Conflux powers them directly. He powers some of the city directly too, but our intel says he does it by charging power cells that are stored here." He pulled up his schematics of the power station. "One of those cells could power this gun—they're extremely compact, and they each have more juice packed into them than should be physically possible. If we blow the station, and the rest of those cells, it will cause serious damage to the city." He nodded. "I like it. Dangerous, but I like it."

"We'll still have to hit Conflux," I said. "It would make sense, even for a rival Epic. First remove the power station, then take out the police force. Chaos. It will work particularly well if we

can kill Conflux using that gun, giving off a big light show."

Prof nodded. "I'll need to do more planning," he said, raising a hand and wiping away the video. It came off like it had been drawn in chalk. He pushed aside another pile of writing and raised his stylus to start working. He stopped, however, then looked at me.

"What?" I asked.

He walked over to his Reckoner jacket, which sat on a table, and took something out from under it. He walked back and handed it to me. A glove. One of the tensors. "You've been practicing?" he asked me.

"I'm not very good yet."

"Get better. Fast. I won't have the team underpowered, and Megan can't seem to make the tensors work."

I took the glove, saying nothing, though I wanted to ask the question. *Why not you, Prof? Why do you refuse to use your own invention?* Tia's warning not to pry too much made me hold my tongue.

"I confronted Nightwielder," I blurted out, only now remembering the reason I'd come to talk with Prof.

"What?"

"He was there, at Diamond's place. I went out and pretended to be one of Diamond's helpers. I … used a UV fingerprint scanner he had to confirm Nightwielder's weakness."

Prof studied me, his face betraying no emotions. "You've had a busy afternoon. I assume you did this at great risk to the entire team?"

"I … Yes." Better he heard it from me, rather than Megan, who would undoubtedly report—in great detail—of how I'd deviated from the plan.

"You show promise," Prof said. "You take risks; you get results. You have proof of what you said about Nightwielder?"

"I got a recording."

"Impressive."

"Megan wasn't very happy with it."

"Megan liked the way things were before," Prof said. "Adding a new team member always upends the dynamic. Besides, I think she's worried you're showing her up. She's still smarting from being unable to make the tensors work."

Megan? Worried that *I* was showing *her* up? Prof must not

know her very well.

"Out with you, then," Prof said. "I want you up to speed with the tensor by the time we hit the power plant. And don't worry too much about Megan …"

"I won't. Thank you."

"… worry about me."

I froze.

Prof started writing on the board and didn't turn back when he spoke, but his words were sharp. "You got results by risking the lives of my people. I assume nobody was hurt, otherwise you'd have mentioned it by now. You show promise, as I said. But if you brashly get one of my people killed, David Charleston, Megan will not be your problem. I won't leave enough of you for her to bother with."

I swallowed. My mouth had suddenly gone dry.

"I trust you with their lives," Prof said, still writing, "and them with yours. Don't betray that trust, son. Keep your impulses in check. Don't just act because you can; act because it's the right thing to do. If you keep that in mind, you'll be all right."

"Yes sir," I said, leaving with a quick step out the cloth-covered doorway.

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“HOW’S the signal?” Prof asked through the earpiece.

I raised my hand to my ear. “Good,” I said. I wore my mobile—newly tuned to the Reckoner mobiles and made completely secure from Steelheart’s prying—on my wrist mount. I’d also been given one of the jackets. It looked like a thin black and red sports-style jacket—though it had wiring all around the inside lining and a little power pack sewn into the back. That was the part that would extend a concussion field around me if I was hit hard.

Prof had built it for me himself. He said it would protect me from a short fall or a small explosion, but I shouldn’t try jumping off any cliffs or getting shot in the face. Not like I was intending to do either.

I wore it proudly. I’d never been officially told I was a member of the team, but these two changes seemed essentially the same thing. Of course, going on this mission was probably a good indication too.

I glanced at my mobile; it showed that I was only on the line with Prof. Tapping the screen could move me to a line to everyone in the team, cycle me to a single member, or let me pick a few of them to talk to.

“You in position?” Prof asked.

“We are.” I stood in a dark tunnel of pure steel, the only light that of my mobile and Megan’s up ahead. She wore a pair of dark jeans and her brown leather jacket, open at the front, over a tight T-shirt. She was inspecting the ceiling.

“Prof,” I said softly, turning away, “you sure I can’t pair up with Cody for this mission?”

“Cody and Tia are interference,” Prof said. “We’ve been over this, son.”

“Maybe I could go with Abraham, then. Or you.” I glanced over my shoulder, then spoke even more softly. “She doesn’t really like me much.”

“I won’t have two members of my crew not getting along,” Prof said sternly. “You will learn to work together. Megan is a professional. It’ll be fine.”

Yes, she’s professional, I thought. *Too professional*. But Prof wasn’t hearing any of it.

I took a deep breath. Part of my nervousness, I knew, was because of the job. One week had passed since my conversation with Prof, and the rest of the Reckoners had agreed that hitting the power station—and imitating a rival Epic while doing so—was the best plan.

Today was the day. We’d sneak in and destroy Newcago’s power plant. This would be my first real Reckoner operation. I was finally a member of the team. I didn’t want to be the weak one.

“You good, son?” Prof asked.

“Yeah.”

“We’re moving. Set your timer.”

I set my mobile for a ten-minute countdown. Prof and Abraham were going to break in first on the other side of the station, where all the huge equipment was. They’d work their way upward, setting charges. At the ten-minute mark, Megan and I would go in and steal a power cell to use with the gauss gun. Tia and Cody would come in last, entering through the hole Prof and Abraham had made. They were a support team; ready to move and help us extract if we needed to, but otherwise hanging back and giving us information and guidance.

I took another deep breath. On the hand opposite my mobile, I wore the black leather tensor, with glowing green strips from the fingertips to the palm. Megan eyed me as I strode up to the end of the tunnel that Abraham had dug the day before during a scouting mission.

I showed her the countdown.

“You’re sure you can do this?” she asked me. There was a hint of skepticism in her voice, though her face was impassive.

“I’ve gotten a lot better with the tensors,” I said.

“You forget that I’ve watched most of your practice sessions.”

“Cody didn’t need those shoes,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow at me.

“I can do it,” I said, stepping up to the end of the tunnel, where Abraham had left a pillar of steel jutting from the ground. It was short enough that I could step up on it to reach the low ceiling. The clock ticked down. We didn’t speak. I mentally sounded out a few ways to start conversation, but each one died on my lips as I opened my mouth. Each time I was confronted by Megan’s glassy stare. She didn’t want to chat. She wanted to do the job.

Why do I even care? I thought, looking up at the ceiling. *Other than that first day, she’s never shown me anything other than coldness and the occasional bit of disdain.*

Yet … there was something about her. More than the fact that she was beautiful, more than the fact that she carried tiny grenades in her top—which I still thought was awesome, by the way.

There had been girls at the Factory. But, like everyone else, they were complacent. They’d just call it living their lives, but they were afraid. Afraid of Enforcement, afraid that an Epic would kill them.

Megan didn’t seem afraid of anything, ever. She didn’t play games with men, fluttering her eyes, saying things she didn’t mean. She did what needed to be done, and she was very good at it. I found that *incredibly* attractive. I wished I could explain that to her. But getting the words out of my mouth felt like trying to push marbles through a keyhole.

“I—” I began.

My mobile beeped.

“Go,” she said, looking upward.

Trying to tell myself I wasn’t relieved by the interruption, I raised my hands up to the ceiling and closed my eyes. I *was* getting better with the tensor. I still wasn’t as good as Abraham, but I wasn’t an embarrassment any longer. At least not most of the time. I pressed my hand flat against the metal ceiling of the tunnel and pushed, holding my hand in place as the vibrations began.

The buzzing was like the eager purr of a muscle car that had just been started, but left in neutral. That was another of Cody’s metaphors for it; I’d said the sensation felt like an unbalanced

washing machine filled with a hundred epileptic chimpanzees. Pretty proud of that one.

I pushed and kept my hand steady, humming softly to myself in the same tone as the tensor. That helped me focus. The others didn't do it, and they didn't always have to keep their hand pressed against a wall either. I eventually wanted to learn to do it like they did, but this would work for now.

The vibrations built, but I contained them, held them in my hand. Kept hold of them until it felt like my fingernails were going to rattle free. Then I pulled my hand back and *pushed* somehow.

Imagine holding a swarm of bees in your mouth, then spitting them out and trying to keep them pointed in a single direction by the sheer force of your breath and will. It's kind of like that. My hand flew back and I launched the half-musical vibrations away, into the ceiling, which rattled and shook with a quiet hum. Steel dust fell down around my arm, showering to the ground below like someone had taken a cheese grater to a refrigerator.

Megan crossed her arms and watched, a single eyebrow raised. I prepared myself for some cold, indifferent comment. She nodded and said, "Nice work."

"Yeah, well, you know, I've been practicing a lot. Hitting the old wall-vaporizing gym."

"The what?" She frowned as she pulled over the ladder we'd brought with us.

"Never mind," I said, climbing up the ladder and peeking my head into the basement of Station Seven, the power station. I'd never been inside any of the city stations, of course. They were like bunkers, with high steel walls and fences surrounding them. Steelheart liked to keep things under a watchful eye; a place like this wouldn't just be a power station but would have government offices on the upper floors as well. All carefully fenced, guarded, and observed.

The basement, fortunately, had no cameras watching it. Most of those were in the hallways.

Megan handed me my rifle, and I climbed out into the room above. We were in a storage chamber, dark save for a few of those glowing "always on" lights that places tend to … well, always leave on. I moved to the wall and tapped my mobile. "We're in," I said softly.

“Good,” Cody’s voice came back.

I blushed. “Sorry. I meant to send that to Prof.”

“You did. He told me to watch over y’all. Turn on the video feed from your earpiece.”

The earpiece was one of those wraparound kinds and had a little camera sticking out over my ear. I tapped a few times on my mobile screen, activating it.

“Nice,” Cody said. “Tia and I have set up here at Prof’s entrance point.” Prof liked contingencies, and that usually meant leaving a person or two back to create diversions or enact plans if the main teams got pinned down.

“I don’t have much to do here,” Cody continued, his Southern drawl as thick as ever, “so I’m going to bother you.”

“Thanks,” I said, glancing back at Megan as she climbed up out of the hole.

“Don’t mention it, lad. And stop looking down Megan’s shirt.”

“I’m not—”

“Just teasing. I hope you keep doing it. It’ll be fun to watch her shoot you in the foot when she catches you.”

I looked away pointedly. Fortunately it didn’t appear that Cody had included Megan in that particular conversation. I actually found myself breathing a little easier, knowing that Cody was watching over us. Megan and I were the two newest members of the team; if anyone could use coaching it would be us.

Megan carried our pack on her back, filled with the things we’d need for the infiltration. She had out a handgun, which honestly would be more useful in close quarters than my rifle. “Ready?” she asked.

I nodded.

“How much ‘improvising’ do I have to be ready for from you today?” she asked.

“Only as much as needed,” I grumbled, raising my hand to the wall. “If I knew when it would be needed, it wouldn’t be improvising, would it? It would be planning.”

She chuckled. “A foreign concept to you.”

“Foreign? Did you not see all the notebooks of plans I brought to the team? You know, the ones we all almost died retrieving?”

She turned away, not looking at me, and her posture grew stiff.

Sparking woman, I thought. *Try making some sense for once*. I shook my head, placing my hand against the wall.

One of the reasons that the city stations were considered impregnable was because of the security. Cameras in all of the hallways and stairwells; I had thought we'd hack into security and change the camera feeds. Prof said we'd certainly hack the feeds to watch them, but changing those feeds to cover sneaking rarely worked as well as it did in the old movies. Steelheart didn't hire stupid security officers, and they'd notice if their video looped. Besides, soldiers patrolled the hallways.

However, there was a much simpler way to make sure we weren't seen. We just had to stay out of the hallways. There weren't cameras in most of the rooms, as the research and experiments done there were kept secret, even from the security watching the building. Besides, logically, if you kept really close watch on all the hallways, you could catch intruders. How else would people move from room to room?

I raised my hand and, with some concentration, vaporized a four-foot-wide hole in the wall. I glanced through it, shining my mobile. I'd ruined some computer equipment on the wall, and I had to shove a desk out of the way to get in, but there was nobody inside. At this hour of the night much of the station was unoccupied, and Tia had drawn up our path very carefully, with the goal of minimizing the chances that we'd run into anyone.

After we crawled through, Megan took something from the pack and placed it on the wall beside the hole I'd made. It had a small red light that blinked ominously. We were to place explosive charges beside each hole we created so that when we detonated the building, it would be impossible to find out about the tensors from the wreckage.

"Keep moving," Cody said. "Every minute y'all are in there is a minute longer that someone might wander into a room and wonder where all those bloody holes came from."

"I'm on it," I said, sliding my finger across my mobile's screen and bringing up Tia's map. If we continued straight ahead through three rooms, we'd reach an emergency stairwell with fewer security cameras. We could avoid those, hopefully, by looping through some walls and moving up two floors. Then we needed to make our way into the main storage chamber for energy cells. We'd set the rest of our charges, steal a power cell or two, and bolt.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Megan asked, watching the door,

her gun at chest level and arm straight and ready.

"Tell her you're listening to ear demons," Cody suggested. "Always works for me."

"Cody is on the line," I said, working on the next wall. "Giving me a delightful running commentary. And telling me about ear demons."

That almost provoked a smile from her. I swore I saw one, for a moment at least.

"Ear demons are totally real," Cody said. "They're what make microphones like these ones work. They're also what tell you to eat the last slice of pie when you know Tia wanted it. Hold for a second. I'm patched into the security system, and there's someone coming down the hall. Hold."

I froze, then hastily quieted the tensor.

"Yeah, they're entering that room next to you," Cody said. "Lights were already on. Might be someone else in it too—can't tell from the security feed. Y'all might have just dodged a bullet. Or rather, dodged having to dodge quite a few of them."

"What do we do?" I asked tensely.

"About Cody?" Megan asked, frowning.

"Cody, could you just patch her in too?" I asked, exasperated.

"You really want to talk about her cleavage when she's on the line?" Cody asked innocently.

"No! I mean. Don't talk about that at all."

"Fine. Megan, there's someone in the next room."

"Options?" she asked, calm.

"We can wait, but the lights were already on. My guess is some late-night scientists still working."

Megan raised her gun.

"Uh …," I said.

"No, lass," Cody said. "You know how Prof feels about that. Shoot guards if you have to. Nobody else." The plan included pulling an alarm and evacuating the building before we detonated our charges.

"I wouldn't have to shoot the people next door," Megan said calmly.

"And what else would you do, lass?" Cody asked. "Knock them out, then leave them for when we blow up the building?"

Megan hesitated.

"Okay," Cody said. "Tia says there's another way. You're going

to have to go up an elevator shaft, though."

"Lovely," Megan said.

We hurried back to the first room we'd come through. Tia uploaded a new map for me, with tensor points, and I got to work. I was a little more nervous this time. Were we going to find random scientists and workers just hanging around all over? What *would* we do if someone surprised us? What if it was some innocent custodian?

For the first time in my life, I found myself nearly as worried about what I might end up doing as I was about what someone might do to me. It was an uncomfortable situation. What we were doing was, basically, terrorism.

But we're the good guys, I told myself, breaking open the wall and letting Megan slide through first. Of course, what terrorist *didn't* think he or she was the good guy? We were doing something important, but what would that matter to the family of the cleaning woman we accidentally killed? As I hastened through the next darkened room—this one was a lab chamber, with some beakers and other glasswork set up—I had trouble shaking off these questions.

And so, I focused on Steelheart. That awful, hateful sneer. Standing there with the gun he'd taken from my father, barrel pointed down at the inferior human.

That image worked. I could forget everything else when I thought of it. I didn't have all the answers, but at least I had a goal. Revenge. Who cared if it would eat me up inside and leave me hollow? So long as it drove me to make life better for everyone else. Prof understood that. I understood it too.

We reached the elevator shaft without incident, entering it through a storage room that bordered it. I vaporized a large hole in the wall, and then Megan poked her head in and looked up the tall, dark shaft. "So, Cody, there's supposed to be a way up?"

"Sure. Handholds on the sides. They put them in all elevator shafts."

"Looks like someone forgot to inform Steelheart of that," I said, looking in beside Megan. "These walls are completely slick. No ladder or anything like that. No ropes or cords either."

Cody cursed.

"So we're back to going the other way?" Megan asked.

I scanned the walls again. The blackness seemed to extend

forever above and below us. “We could wait for the elevator to come.”

“The elevators have cameras,” Cody said.

“So we ride on top of it,” I said.

“And alert the people inside when we drop onto it?” Megan asked.

“We just wait for one that doesn’t have anyone in it,” I said. “Elevators are empty about half the time, right? They’re responding to calls people make.”

“All right,” Cody said. “Prof and Abraham have hit a small snag —waiting for a room to clear out so they can move through. Prof says you have five minutes to wait. If nothing happens by then, we’re scrapping the job.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling a stab of disappointment.

“I’m going to run some visuals for them,” Cody said. “I’ll be offline from you for a bit; call me if you need me. I’ll watch the elevator. If it moves, I’ll let you know.” The line clicked as Cody switched frequencies, and we started waiting.

We both sat quietly, straining to hear any sounds of the elevator moving, though we’d never spot it before Cody did with his video feeds.

“So … how often is it like this?” I asked after a few minutes of kneeling beside Megan, stuck in the room beside the hole I’d burrowed into the side of the elevator shaft.

“Like what?” she asked.

“The waiting.”

“More than you’d think,” she said. “The jobs we do, they’re often all about timing. Good timing requires a lot of waiting around.” She glanced at my hand, and I found that I’d been nervously tapping the side of the wall.

I forced myself to stop.

“You sit,” she said, voice growing softer, “and you wait. You go over and over the plan, picture it in your mind. Then it usually goes wrong anyway.”

I eyed her suspiciously.

“What?” she asked.

“The thing you just said. It’s exactly what I think too.”

“So?”

“So if something usually goes wrong, why are you always on my back about improvising?”

She grew thin-lipped.

"No," I said. "It's time you leveled with me, Megan. Not just about this mission, but about everything. What is with you? Why do you treat me like you hate me? *You* were the one who originally spoke up for me when I wanted to join! You sounded impressed with me at first—Prof might never have listened to my plan at all if you hadn't said what you did. But since then you've acted like I was a gorilla at your buffet."

"A … *what*?"

"Gorilla at your buffet. You know … eating all your food? Making you annoyed? That kind of thing?"

"You're a very special person, David."

"Yeah, I take a specialness pill each morning. Look, Megan, I'm *not* letting go of this. The whole time I've been with the Reckoners, it seems like I've been doing something that bothers you. Well, what is it? What made you turn on me like that?"

She looked away.

"Is it my face?" I asked. "Because that's the only thing I can think of. I mean, you were all for me after the Fortuity hit. Maybe it's my face. I don't think it's too bad a face, as far as faces go, but it does look kind of stupid sometimes when I—"

"It's not your face," she interrupted.

"I didn't think it was, but I need you to talk to me. Say something." *Because I think you're hotter than hell and I can't understand what went wrong.* Fortunately I stopped myself from saying that part out loud. I also kept my eyes straight at her head, just in case Cody was watching in.

She said nothing.

"Well?" I prompted.

"Five minutes is up," she said, checking her mobile.

"I'm not going to let this go so easily, this—"

"Five minutes is up," Cody suddenly said, cutting in. "Sorry, kids. This mission is a bust. Nobody is moving the elevators."

"Can't you send one for us?" I asked.

Cody chuckled. "We're tapped into the security feed, lad, but that's a far cry from being able to control things in the building. If Tia could hack us in that far, we could blow the building from the inside by overpowering the plants or something."

"Oh." I looked up the cavernous shaft. It resembled an enormous throat, stretching upward … one we needed to get

up … which made us …

Bad analogy. Very bad. Regardless, there was a twisting feeling in my gut. I hated the idea of backing down. Above lay the path to destroying Steelheart. Behind lay more waiting, more planning. I'd been planning for years.

"Oh no," Megan said.

"What?" I asked absently.

"You're going to improvise, aren't you?"

I reached out into the shaft with the hand that wore the tensor, pressed it flat against the wall, and began a small vibrative burst. Abraham had taught me to make bursts of different sizes; he said that a master with the tensors could control the vibrations, leaving patterns or even shapes in your target.

I pushed my hand hard, flat, feeling the glove shake. It wasn't just the glove, though. It was my whole hand. That had confused me at first. It seemed like *I* was creating the power, not the glove —the glove just helped shape the blast somehow.

I couldn't fail at this. If I did the operation was over. I should have felt stress at that, but I didn't. For some reason, I was realizing, when things got really, really tense I found it easier to relax.

Steelheart looming above my father. A gunshot. I *would not back down*.

The glove vibrated; dust fell away from the wall in a little patch around my hand. I slipped my fingers forward and felt what I'd done.

"A handhold," Megan said softly, shining the light of her mobile.

"What, really?" Cody asked. "Turn on your camera, lass." A moment later he whistled. "You've been holding back on me, David. I didn't think you were nearly practiced enough to do something like that. I might have suggested it myself if I'd thought you could."

I moved my hand to the side and made another handhold, placing it beside the other in the shaft just next to the hole in the wall. I made two more for my feet, then swung out of the hole in the wall and into the elevator shaft, placing my hands and feet in the handholds.

I stretched up and made another set of holds above. I climbed up, rifle slung over my shoulder. I did *not* look down but made

another set of holds and continued. Climbing and carving with the tensor wasn't by any means easy, but I was able to shape the tensor blasts to leave a ridge at the front of each handhold, making them easy to grip.

"Can Prof and Abraham stall for a little longer?" Megan asked from below. "David seems to be working at a good clip, but it might take us about fifteen minutes to get up."

"Tia's calculating," Cody said.

"Well, I'm going after David," Megan said. She sounded muffled. I glanced over my shoulder; she'd wrapped a scarf around her face.

The dust from the handholds; she doesn't want to breathe it in. Smart. I was having trouble avoiding it, and steel dust did *not* seem like a smart thing to inhale. Abraham said tensor dust wasn't as dangerous as it seemed, but I still didn't think it would be a good idea, so I ducked my head and held my breath each time I made a new hole.

"I'm impressed," a voice said in my ear. Prof's voice. It nearly made me leap in shock, which would have been a very bad thing. He must have patched into my visual feed with his mobile, and could see the images made by the camera on my earpiece.

"Those holes are crisp and well formed," Prof continued. "Keep at it and you'll soon be as good as Abraham. You might already have passed up Cody."

"You sound worried about something," I said between making handholds.

"Not troubled. Just surprised."

"It needed to be done," I said, grunting as I pulled myself up past another floor.

Prof was silent for a few moments. "That it did. Look, we can't have you extract down this same route. It will take too long, so you'll have to go out another way. Tia will let you know where. Wait for the first explosion."

"Affirmative," I said.

"And, David," Prof added.

"Yeah?"

"Good work."

I smiled, pulling myself up again.

We continued at it, climbing up the elevator shaft. I worried that the elevator would come down at some point, though if it

did it should miss us by a few inches. We were on the side of the shaft where there *should* have been a ladder. They just hadn't installed one.

Perhaps Steelheart has watched the same movies that we have, I thought with a grimace as we finally passed the second floor. One more to go.

My mobile clicked in my ear. I glanced at it on my wrist—someone had muted our channel.

"I don't like what you've done to the team," Megan called up, her voice muffled.

I glanced over my shoulder at her. She wore the backpack with our equipment in it, and her nose and mouth were covered with the scarf. Those eyes of hers glared at me, softly lit by the glow of the mobile strapped to her forearm. Beautiful eyes, peeking out above the shroud of a scarf.

With a huge, black pit stretching behind her. Whoa. I lurched woozily.

"Slontze," she called. "Stay focused."

"You're the one who said something!" I whispered, turning back around. "What do you mean you don't like what I did to the team?"

"Before you showed up we were going to move out of Newcago," Megan said from below. "Hit Fortuity, then leave. You made us stay."

I continued climbing. "But—"

"Oh, just shut up and let me talk for once."

I shut up.

"I joined the Reckoners to kill Epics who deserved it," Megan continued. "Newcago is one of the safest, most stable places in the entire Fractured States. I don't think we should be killing Steelheart, and I don't like how you've hijacked the team to fight your own personal war against him. He's brutal, yes, but he's doing a better job than most Epics. He doesn't deserve to die."

The words stunned me. She didn't think we should kill Steelheart? He didn't *deserve* to die? It was insanity. I resisted the urge to look down again. "Can I talk now?" I asked, making another pair of handholds.

"Okay, fine."

"Are you *crazy*? Steelheart is a monster."

"Yes. I'll admit that. But he's an *effective* monster. Look, what

are we doing today?"

"Destroying a power plant."

"And how many cities out there still have power plants?" she asked. "Do you even know?"

I kept climbing.

"I grew up in Portland," she said. "Do you know what happened there?"

I did, though I didn't say. It hadn't been good.

"The turf wars between Epics left the city in ruins," Megan continued, her voice softer now. "There is nothing left, David. *Nothing*. All of Oregon is a wasteland; even the trees are gone. There aren't any power plants, sewage treatment plants, or grocery stores. That was what Newcago would have become, if Steelheart hadn't stepped in."

I continued climbing, sweat tickling the back of my neck. I thought about the change in Megan—she'd grown cold toward me right after I'd first talked about taking down Steelheart. The times when she'd treated me the worst had been when we'd been making breakthroughs. When we'd gone to fetch my plans and when I'd found out how to kill Nightwielder.

It hadn't been my "improvising" that had set her against me. It had been my intentions. My successes in getting the team to target Steelheart.

"I don't want to be the cause of something like Portland happening again," Megan continued. "Yes, Steelheart is terrible. But he's a kind of terrible that people can live with."

"So why haven't you quit?" I asked. "Why are you here?"

"Because I'm a Reckoner," she said. "And it's not my job to contradict Prof. I'll do my job, Knees. I'll do it well. But this time, I think we're making a mistake."

She was using that nickname of hers for me again. It actually seemed like a good sign, as she only seemed to use it when she was less annoyed at me. It was kind of affectionate, wasn't it? I just wished the nickname hadn't been a reference to something so embarrassing. Why not … Super-Great-Shot? That kind of rolled off the tongue, didn't it?

We climbed the rest of the way in silence. Megan turned our audio feed to the rest of the team back on, which seemed an indication that she thought the conversation was over. Maybe it was—I certainly didn't know what else to say. How could she

possibly think that living under Steelheart was a *good* thing?

I thought of the other kids at the Factory, of the people in the understreets. I guessed that many of them thought the same way—they'd come here knowing that Steelheart was a monster, but they still thought life was better in Newcago than in other places.

Only they were complacent—Megan was anything but that. She was active, incredible, capable. How could *she* think like they did? It shook what I knew of the world—at least, what I thought I knew. The Reckoners were supposed to be different.

What if she was right?

"Oh *sparks*!" Cody suddenly said in my ear.

"What?"

"Y'all've got trouble, lad. It's—"

At that moment the doors to the elevator shaft just above—the ones on the third floor—slid open. Two uniformed guards stepped up to the ledge and peered down into the darkness.

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“I’M telling you, I heard something,” one of the guards said, squinting downward. He seemed to be looking right at me. But it was dark in the elevator shaft—darker than I’d thought it would be, with the doors open.

“I don’t see anything,” the other said. His voice echoed softly.

The first pulled his flashlight off his belt.

My heart lurched. *Uh-oh.*

I pressed my hand against the wall; it was the only thing I could think to do. The tensor started vibrating, and I tried to concentrate, but it was *hard* with them up there. The flashlight clicked.

“See? Hear that?”

“Sounds like the furnace,” the second guard said drily.

My hand rattling against the side of the wall did have a kind of mechanical sound to it. I grimaced but kept on. The light of the flashlight shone in the shaft. I nearly lost control of the vibration.

There was no way they could have missed seeing me with that light. They were too close.

“Nothing there,” the guard said with a grunt.

What? I looked up. Somehow, despite being only a short distance away, it seemed they hadn’t seen me. I frowned, confused.

“Huh,” the other guard said. “I do hear a sound, though.”

“It’s coming from … you know,” the first guard said.

“Oh,” the other said. “Right.”

The first guard stuffed the flashlight back into place on his belt. How could he have missed seeing me? He’d shined it right in my

direction.

The two backed away from the opening and let the doors slide shut.

What in Calamity's fires? I thought. Could they have actually missed us in the darkness?

My tensor went off.

I'd been preparing to vaporize a pocket into the wall to hide in—get us out of their line of fire if it came to that. But because I wasn't focusing the blast, I took a large chunk out of the wall in front of me, and in an instant my handhold disappeared. I grabbed at the side of the hole I'd made, barely finding a grip.

A burst of dust fell back over me and cascaded over Megan in an enormous shower. Holding tight to the side of the hole, I glanced down to find her glaring up at me, blinking dust from her eyes. Her hand actually seemed to be inching toward her gun.

Calamity! I thought with a start. Her scarf and skin were dusted silver, and her eyes were *angry*. I don't think I'd ever seen an expression like that in a person's eyes before—not directed at me at least. It was like I could feel the hate coming off her.

Her hand kept inching toward the handgun at her side.

"M-Megan?" I asked.

Her hand stopped. I didn't know what I'd seen, but it was gone in a moment. She blinked, and her expression softened. "You need to watch what you're destroying, Knees," she snapped, reaching up to wipe some of the dust off her face.

"Yeah," I said, then looked back up into the hole I was hanging onto. "Hey, there's a room here." I raised my mobile, shining light into it to get a better look.

It was a small room—a few orderly desks outfitted with computer terminals lined one wall and filing cabinets ran along the other. There were two doors, one a reinforced metal security door with a keypad.

"Megan, there's definitely a room here. And it doesn't look like there's anyone in it. Come on." I pulled myself up and crawled through.

As soon as I was in I helped Megan up and out of the shaft. She hesitated before taking my hand, then once she was out she walked past me without a word. She seemed to have gone back to being cold toward me, maybe even a little mean.

I knelt beside the hole back into the elevator shaft. I couldn't

shake the feeling that something very strange had just happened. First the guard hadn't seen us, then Megan went from opening up to me to totally closing off in seconds flat. Was she having second thoughts about what she'd shared with me? Was she worried I'd tell Prof that she didn't support killing Steelheart?

"What *is* this place?" Megan said from the center of the small room. The ceiling was low enough that she almost had to stoop—I would definitely have to. She unwrapped her scarf, releasing a puff of metal dust, grimaced, and then began shaking out her clothing.

"No idea," I said, checking my mobile and the map Tia had uploaded. "The room's not on the map."

"Low ceilings," Megan said. "Security door with a code. Interesting." She tossed her pack to me. "Put an explosive on the hole you made. I'll check things out here."

I fished in the pack for an explosive as she cracked open the door that didn't have the security pad and then stepped through. I attached the small device to the hole I'd made, then noticed some exposed wires in the lower part of the wall.

I followed them down and was prying up a section of the floor when Megan came back.

"There are two other rooms like this," she said. "No people in them, small and built up against the elevator shaft. Best I can figure, this is where furnace equipment and elevator maintenance is supposed to be, but they hid some rooms here instead and took them off the building schematics. I wonder if there's space between other floors—if there are rooms hidden there too."

"Look at this," I said, pointing at what I'd discovered.

She knelt beside me and eyed the wall and the wiring.

"Explosives," she said.

"The room's *already* set to blow," I said. "Creepy, eh?"

"Whatever is in here," Megan said, "it must be important. Important enough that it's worth destroying the entire power plant to keep it from being discovered."

We both looked up at the computers.

"What are you two doing?" Cody's voice came back onto our feed.

"We found this room," I said, "and—"

"Keep moving," Cody said, cutting me off. "Prof and Abraham just ran into some guards and were forced to shoot them. The

guards are down, bodies hidden, but they'll be missed soon. If we're lucky we'll have a few minutes before someone realizes they're not on their patrol anymore."

I cursed, fishing in my pocket.

"What's that?" Megan asked.

"One of the universal blasting caps I got from Diamond," I said. "I want to see if they work." I nervously used my electrical tape to stick the little round nub on the explosives we'd found under the floor. In my pocket I carried its detonator—the one that looked like a pen.

"By the map Tia gave us," Megan said, "we're only two rooms over from the storage area with the energy cells, but we're a little below it."

We shared a glance, then split up to scour the hidden room. We might not have much time, but we needed to at least *try* to find out what information this place contained. She pulled open a filing cabinet and grabbed a handful of folders. In an instant I was up and opening desk drawers. One had a couple of data chips. I grabbed them, waved them at Megan, then tossed them in her bag. She threw the folders in, then searched another desk while I raised a hand to the right wall and made us a hole.

Since the hidden room was halfway between two floors, I wasn't certain how that related to the rest of the building. I made a hole in the wall in the direction we wanted to go, but I made it near the ceiling.

That opened up into a room on the third floor, but near the floor. So there was some overlap between our hidden room and the third floor. With a glance at the map, I could see how they'd hidden the room. On the schematics the elevator shaft was shown as slightly bigger than it actually was. It also included a maintenance shaft that wasn't actually there—and that explained the lack of handholds in the elevator. The builders assumed the maintenance shaft would provide a way to service the elevator, not knowing that the hidden room would actually go in that space.

Megan and I climbed through the hole and onto the third floor. We crossed that room—a conference room of some sort—and passed through another, which was a monitoring station. I vaporized the wall and opened a hole into a long, low-ceilinged storage area. This was our target: the room where the power cells

were kept.

"We're in," Megan said to Cody as we slipped inside. The room was filled with shelves, and on them were various pieces of electrical equipment, none of which we wanted.

We went in different directions, searching hastily.

"Awesome," Cody said. "The power cells should be in there somewhere. Look for cylinders about a handspan wide and about as tall as a boot."

I spied some large storage lockers on the far wall, with locks on the doors. "Might be in here," I said to Megan, moving toward them. I made quick work of the locks with the tensor and pulled the doors open as she joined me. Inside one was a tall column of green cylinders stacked on top of one another on their sides. Each cylinder looked vaguely like a cross between a very small beer keg and a car battery.

"Those are the power cells," Cody said, sounding relieved. "I was half worried there wouldn't be any. Good thing I brought my four-leaf clover on this operation."

"Four-leaf clover?" Megan said with a snort as she fished something out of her pack.

"Sure. From the homeland."

"That's the Irish, Cody, not the Scottish."

"I know," Cody said without missing a beat. "I had to kill an Irish dude to get mine."

I pulled out one of the power cells. "They aren't as heavy as I thought they'd be," I said. "Are we sure these will have enough juice to power the gauss gun? That thing needs a *lot* of energy."

"Those cells were charged by Conflux," Cody said in my ear. "They're more powerful by magnitudes than anything we could make or buy. If they won't work, nothing will. Grab as many as you can carry."

They might not have been as heavy as I'd thought, but they were still kind of bulky. We took the rest of the equipment out of Megan's pack, then retrieved the smaller sack we had stuffed in the bottom. I managed to stuff four of the cells in the pack while Megan transferred the rest of our equipment—a few explosive charges, some rope, and some ammunition—to her smaller sack. There were also some lab coats for disguises. I left these out—I suspected we'd need them to escape.

"How are Prof and Abraham?" I asked.

“On their way out,” Cody said.

“And our extraction?” I asked. “Prof said we shouldn’t go back down the elevator shaft.”

“You have your lab coats?” Cody asked.

“Sure,” Megan said. “But if we go in the hallways, they might record our faces.”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take,” Cody said. “First explosion is a go in two minutes.”

We threw on the lab coats, and I squatted down and let Megan help me put on the backpack with the power cells. It was heavy, but I could still move reasonably well. Megan threw on her lab coat. It looked good on her, but pretty much anything would. She swung her own lighter pack over her shoulder, then eyed my rifle.

“It can be disassembled,” I explained as I pulled the stock from the rifle, then popped out the magazine and removed the cartridge from the chamber. I slid on the safety just in case, then stuffed the pieces in her sack.

The coats were embroidered with Station Seven’s logo, and we both had fake security badges to go with them. The disguises would never have worked getting us in—security was far too tight—but in a moment of chaos, they should get us out.

The building shook with an ominous rumble—explosion number one. That was mostly to prompt an evacuation rather than to inflict any real damage.

“Go!” Cody yelled in our ears.

I vaporized the lock on the door to the room and the two of us burst out into the hallway. People were peeking out of doors—it seemed to be a busy floor, even at night. Some of the people were cleaning staff in blue overalls, but others were technicians in lab coats.

“Explosion!” I did my best to seem panicked. “Someone’s attacking the building!”

The chaos started immediately, and we were soon swept up into the crowd fleeing from the building. About thirty seconds later, Cody triggered the second explosion, on an upper floor. The ground trembled and people in the hallway around us screamed, glancing at the ceiling. Some of the dozen or so people clutched small computers or briefcases.

There wasn’t actually anything to be frightened of. These initial

explosions had been set in unpopulated locations that wouldn't bring down the building. There would be four of those early blasts, and they'd been placed to shepherd all the civilians out of the structure. Then the real explosions could begin.

We made a hasty flight through hallways and down stairwells, being careful to keep our heads down. Something felt odd about the place, and as we ran I realized what it was. The building was clean. The floors, the walls, the rooms … too clean. It had been too dark for me to notice it when we were making our way in, but in the light, it seemed stark to me. The understreets weren't ever this clean. It didn't feel right for everything to be so scrubbed, so neat.

As we ran it became clear that the place was big enough that any one employee wouldn't know everyone else who worked there, and though our intelligence said that the security officers had the faces of all employees in portfolios that they checked against security feeds, no one challenged us.

Most of the security officers were running with the growing crowd, just as worried about the explosions as everyone else, and that dampened my fears even more.

As a group we flooded down the last flight of stairs and burst out into the lobby. "What's going on?" a security officer yelled. He was standing by the exit with his gun out and aimed. "Did anyone see anything?"

"An Epic!" Megan said breathlessly. "Wearing green. I saw him walking through the building throwing out blasts of energy!"

The third explosion went off, shaking the building. It was followed by a series of smaller explosions. Other groups of people flooded out of adjacent stairwells and from the ground-floor hallways.

The guard cursed, then did the smart thing. He ran too. He wouldn't be expected to face an Epic—indeed, he could get in trouble for doing it, even if that Epic was working against Steelheart. Ordinary men left Epics alone, end of story. In the Fractured States that was a law greater than any other.

We burst out of the building and onto the grounds. I glanced back to see trails of smoke rising from the enormous structure. Even as I watched, another series of small explosions went off in an upper row of windows, each one flashing green. Prof and Abraham hadn't just planted bombs, they'd planted a light show.

“It *is* an Epic,” a woman near me breathed. “Who would be so foolish …”

I flashed a smile at Megan, and we joined the flood of people running to the gates in the wall surrounding the grounds. The guards there tried to hold people in, but when the next explosion went off they gave up and opened the gates. Megan and I followed the others out into the dark streets of the city, leaving the smoldering building behind.

“Security cameras are still up,” Cody reported on the open channel to everyone. “Building is still evacuating.”

“Hold the last explosions,” Prof said calmly. “But blow the leaflets.”

There was a soft pop from behind, and I knew that the leaflets proclaiming that a new Epic had come to town had been blasted from the upper floors and were floating down to the city. Limelight, we were calling him—the name I’d chosen. The flyer was filled with propaganda calling Steelheart out, claiming that Limelight was the new master of Newcago.

Megan and I were to our car before Cody gave the all clear. I climbed in the driver’s side, and Megan followed through the same door, shoving me over into the passenger seat.

“I can drive,” I said.

“You destroyed the last car going around one block, Knees,” she said, starting the vehicle. “Knocked down two signs, I believe. And I think I saw the remains of some trash cans as we fled.” There was a faint smile on her lips.

“Wasn’t my fault,” I said, thrilled by our success as I looked back at Station Seven rising into the dark sky. “Those trash cans were totally asking for it. Cheeky slontzes.”

“I’m triggering the big one,” Cody said in my ear.

A line of blasts sounded in the building, including the explosives Megan and I had placed, I guessed. The building shook, fires burning out the windows.

“Huh,” Cody said, confused. “Didn’t bring it down.”

“Good enough,” Prof answered. “Evidence of our incursion is gone, and the station won’t be operating anytime soon.”

“Yeah,” Cody said. I could hear the disappointment in his voice. “I just wish it had been a little more dramatic.”

I pulled the pen detonator from my pocket. It probably wouldn’t do anything—the explosives we’d placed on the walls

had probably already set off the ones in the floor. I clicked the top of the pen anyway.

The following explosion was about ten times as strong as the previous one. Our car shook and debris sprayed out over the city, dust and bits of rock raining down. Megan and I both spun around in our seats in time to catch the building collapse in an awful-sounding crunch.

“Wow,” Cody said. “Look at that. I guess some of the power cells went up.”

Megan glanced at me, then at the pen, then rolled her eyes. In seconds we were racing down the street in the opposite direction of fire trucks and emergency responders, heading for the rendezvous point with the other Reckoners.

PART THREE

23

I grunted, hauling the rope hand over hand. A plaintive squeak came from the pulley system with each draw, as if I had strapped some unfortunate mouse to a torture device and was twisting with glee.

The construction had been set up around the tunnel into the Reckoner burrow, which was the only way in or out. It had been five days since our attack on the power station, and we'd been lying low during most of that, planning our next move—the hit on Conflux to undermine Enforcement.

Abraham had just gotten back from a supply run. Which meant that I'd stopped being one of the team's tensor specialists and started being their source of free teenage labor.

I continued pulling, sweat dripping from my brow and beginning to soak through my T-shirt. Eventually the crate appeared from the depths of the hole, and Megan pulled it off its rollers and heaved it into the room. I let go of the rope, sending the roller board and rope back down the tunnel so Abraham could tie on another crate of supplies.

"You want to do the next one?" I asked Megan, wiping my brow with a towel.

"No," she said lightly. She heaved the crate onto a dolly and wheeled it over to stack it with the others.

"You sure?" I asked, arms aching.

"You're doing such a fine job," she said. "And it's good exercise." She settled the crate, then sat down on a chair, putting her feet up on the desk and sipping a lemonade while reading a book on her mobile.

I shook my head. She was unbelievable.

"Think of it as being chivalrous," Megan said absently, tapping the screen to scroll down more text. "Protecting a defenseless girl from pain and all that."

"Defenseless?" I asked as Abraham called up. I sighed, then started pulling the rope again.

She nodded. "In an abstract way."

"How can someone be *abstractly* defenseless?"

"Takes a lot of work," she said, then sipped her drink. "It only *looks* easy. Just like abstract art."

I grunted. "Abstract art?" I asked, heaving on the rope.

"Sure. You know, guy paints a black line on a canvas, calls it a metaphor, sells it for millions."

"That never happened."

She looked up at me, amused. "Sure it did. You never learned about abstract art in school?"

"I was schooled at the Factory," I said. "Basic math, reading, geography, history. Wasn't time for anything else."

"But before that. Before Calamity."

"I was eight," I said. "And I lived in inner-city Chicago, Megan. My education mostly involved learning to avoid gangs and how to keep my head down at school."

"That's what you learned when you were *eight*? In grade school?"

I shrugged and kept pulling. She seemed troubled by what I'd said, though I'll admit, I was troubled by what she'd said. People hadn't really paid that much money for such simple things, had they? It baffled me. Pre-Calamity people had been a strange lot.

I hauled the next crate up, and Megan hopped down from her chair again to move it. I couldn't imagine that she was getting much reading done, but she didn't seem bothered by the interruptions. I watched her, taking a long gulp from my cup of water.

Things had been … different between us since her confession in the elevator shaft. In a lot of ways she was more relaxed around me, which didn't make that much sense. Shouldn't things have been more awkward? I knew she didn't support our mission. That felt like a pretty big deal to me.

She really *was* a professional, though. She didn't agree that Steelheart should be killed, but she didn't abandon the

Reckoners, or even ask for a transfer to another Reckoner cell. I didn't know how many of those there were—apparently only Tia and Prof knew—but there was at least one other.

Either way, Megan stayed on board and didn't let her feelings distract her from her job. She might not agree that Steelheart needed to die, but from what I'd pried from her, she believed in fighting the Epics. She was like a soldier who believed a certain battle wasn't tactically sound, yet supported the generals enough to fight it anyway.

I respected her for that. Sparks, I was liking her more and more. And though she hadn't been particularly affectionate toward me lately, she wasn't openly hostile and cold any longer. That left me room to work some seductive magic. I wished I knew some.

She got the crate in place, and I waited for Abraham to call up that I should start pulling again. Instead he appeared at the mouth of the tunnel and started to unhook the pulley system. His shoulder had been healed from the gunshot using the harmsway, the Reckoner device that helped flesh heal extraordinarily fast.

I didn't know much about it, though I'd spoken to Cody—he'd called it the "last of the three." Three bits of incredible technology brought to the Reckoners from Prof's days as a scientist. The tensors, the jackets, the harmsway. From what Abraham told me, Prof had developed each technology and then stolen them from the lab he'd worked in, intent on starting his own war against the Epics.

Abraham got the last parts of the pulley down.

"Are we done?" I asked.

"Indeed."

"I counted more crates than that."

"The others are too big to fit through the tunnel," Abraham said. "Cody's going to drive them over to the hangar."

That was what they called the place where they kept their vehicles. I'd been there; it was a large chamber with a few cars and a van inside. It wasn't nearly as secure as this hideout was—the hangar had to have access to the upper city and couldn't be part of the understreets.

Abraham walked over to the stack of a dozen crates we'd heaved into the hideout. He rubbed his chin, inspecting them. "We might as well unload these," he said. "I've got another hour

to spare."

"Before what?" I asked, joining him at the crates.

He didn't reply.

"You've been gone a lot these last few days," I noted.

Again, he didn't reply.

"He's not going to tell you where he's been, Knees," Megan said from her lounging position at the desk. "And get used to it. Prof sends him out on secret errands a lot."

"But …," I said, feeling hurt. I'd thought I'd earned my place on the team.

"Do not be saddened, David," Abraham said, grabbing a crowbar to crack open one of the crates. "It is not a matter of trust. We must keep some things secret, even within the team, should one of us be taken captive. Steelheart has his way of getting to what one hides—nobody except Prof should know everything we are doing."

It was a good rationale, and it was probably why I couldn't know about other Reckoner cells either, but it was still annoying. As Abraham cracked open another crate, I reached to the pouch at my side and slipped out my tensor. With that, I vaporized the wooden lids off a few crates.

Abraham raised an eyebrow at me.

"What?" I said. "Cody told me to keep practicing."

"You are growing quite good," Abraham said. Then he reached into one of the crates I'd opened and fished out an apple, which was now covered in sawdust. It made something of a mess getting it out. "Quite good," he continued. "But sometimes, the crowbar is more effective, eh? Besides, we may wish to reuse these crates."

I sighed, but nodded. It was just … well, hard. The sense of strength I'd felt during the power station infiltration was difficult to forget. Opening the holes in the walls and creating those handholds, I'd been able to bend matter to my will. The more I used the tensor, the more excited I grew about the possibilities it offered.

"It is also important," Abraham said, "to avoid leaving traces of what we can do. Imagine if everyone knew about these things, eh? It would be a different world, more difficult for us."

I nodded, reluctantly putting the tensor away. "Too bad we had to leave that hole for Diamond to see."

Abraham hesitated, just briefly. “Yes,” he said. “Too bad.”

I helped him unload the supplies, and Megan joined us, working with characteristic efficiency. She ended up doing a lot of supervising, telling us where to stow the various foodstuffs. Abraham accepted her direction without complaint, even though she was the junior member of the team.

About halfway through the unloading, Prof came out of his planning room. He walked over to us while scanning through some papers in a folder.

“Did you learn anything, Prof?” Abraham asked.

“Rumors are going our way, for once,” Prof said, tossing the folder onto Tia’s desk. “The city’s buzzing with the news of a new Epic come to challenge Steelheart. Half the city is talking about it, while the other half is bunkering down in their basements, waiting for the fighting to blow over.”

“That’s great!” I said.

“Yes.” Prof seemed troubled.

“What’s wrong, then?” I asked.

He tapped the folder. “Did Tia tell you what was on those data chips you brought back from the power plant?”

I shook my head, trying to hide my curiosity. Was he going to tell me? Perhaps it would give me a clue to what Abraham had been up to the last few days.

“It’s propaganda,” Prof said. “We think you found a hidden public manipulation wing of Steelheart’s government. The files you brought back included press releases, outlines of rumors planned to be started, and stories of things Steelheart has done. Most of those stories and rumors are false, so far as Tia can determine.”

“He wouldn’t be the first ruler to fabricate a grand history for himself,” Abraham noted, stowing some canned chicken on one of the shelves that had been carved to fill the entire wall of the back room.

“But why would Steelheart need to do that?” I asked, wiping my brow. “I mean … he’s practically immortal. It’s not like he needs to look more powerful than he is.”

“He’s arrogant,” Abraham said. “Everybody knows this. You can see it in his eyes, in how he speaks, in what he does.”

“Yes,” Prof said. “Which is why these rumors are so confusing. The stories aren’t meant to bolster him—or if they are, he has an

odd way of going about it. Most of the stories are about atrocities he's committed. People he's murdered, buildings—even small towns—he has supposedly wiped out. But none of it has actually happened."

"He's spreading rumors about having slaughtered towns full of people?" Megan asked, sounding troubled.

"So far as we can tell," Prof said. He joined in, helping unload the crates. Megan had stopped giving orders, I noticed, now that he was around. "Someone, at least, wants Steelheart to sound more terrible than he really is."

"Maybe we found some kind of revolutionary group," I said, eager.

"Doubtful," Prof said. "Inside one of the major government buildings? With that kind of security? Besides, what you told me seems to imply the guards knew of the place. Anyway, many of these stories are accompanied by documentation claiming they were devised by Steelheart himself. It even notes their falsehood, and the need to substantiate them with made-up facts."

"He's been bragging," Abraham said, "and making things up—only now, his ministry has to make all of his claims sound true. Otherwise he'll look foolish."

Prof nodded, and my heart sank. I'd assumed that we'd found something important. Instead all I'd discovered was a department dedicated to making Steelheart look good. And more evil. Or something.

"So Steelheart is not as terrible as he would like us to think," Abraham said.

"Oh, he's pretty terrible," Prof said. "Wouldn't you say, David?"

"Over seventeen thousand confirmed deaths to his name," I said absently. "It's in my notes. Many were innocents. They can't all be fabrications."

"And they're not," Prof said. "He's a terrible, awful individual. He just wants to make sure that we all know it."

"How strange," Abraham said.

I dug into a crate of cheeses, getting out the paper-wrapped blocks and loading them in the cold-storage pit on the far side of the room. So many of the foods the Reckoners ate were things I'd never been able to afford. Cheese, fresh fruit. Most food in Newcago had to be shipped in because of the darkness. It was impossible to grow fruit and vegetables outside, and Steelheart

was careful to keep a firm hold on the farmlands surrounding the city.

Expensive foods. I was already getting used to eating them. Odd, how quickly that could happen.

"Prof," I said, placing a cheese wheel in the pit, "do you ever wonder if maybe Newcago will be worse without Steelheart than it is with him?"

At the other side of the room, Megan turned sharply to look at me, but I didn't look at her. *I won't tell him what you said, so stop glaring at me. I just want to know*.

"It probably will be," Prof said. "For a while at least. The infrastructure of the city will probably collapse. Food will get scarce. Unless someone powerful takes Steelheart's place and secures Enforcement, there will be looting."

"But—"

"You want your revenge, son? Well, that's the cost. I won't sugarcoat it. We try to keep from hurting innocents, but when we kill Steelheart, we'll cause suffering."

I sat down beside the cold-storage hole.

"Did you never think of this?" Abraham asked. He'd gotten that necklace out from underneath his shirt and was rubbing his finger on it. "In all those years of planning, preparing to kill the one you hated, did you never consider what would happen to Newcago?"

I blushed, but then I shook my head. I hadn't. "So … what do we do?"

"Continue as we have," Prof said. "Our job is to cut out the infected flesh. Only then can the body start to heal—but it's going to hurt a lot first."

"But …"

Prof turned to me, and I saw something in his expression. A deep exhaustion, the tiredness of one who had been fighting a war for a long, long time. "It's good for you to think of this, son. Ponder. Worry. Stay up nights, frightened for the casualties of your ideology. It will do you good to realize the price of fighting.

"I need to warn you of something, however. There aren't any answers to be found. There are no good choices. Submissiveness to a tyrant or chaos and suffering. In the end I chose the second, though it flays my soul to do so. If we don't fight, humankind is finished. We slowly become sheep to the Epics, slaves and servants—stagnant.

“This isn’t just about revenge or payback. It’s about the survival of our race. It’s about men being the masters of their own destiny. I choose suffering and uncertainty over becoming a lapdog.”

“That’s all well and good,” Megan said, “to choose for yourself. But Prof, you’re *not* just choosing for yourself. You’re choosing for everyone in the city.”

“So I am.” He slid some cans onto the shelf.

“In the end,” Megan said, “they *don’t* get to be masters of their own destinies. They get to be dominated by Steelheart or left to fend for themselves—at least until another Epic comes along to dominate them again.”

“Then we’ll kill him too,” Prof said softly.

“How many can you kill?” Megan said. “You can’t stop all of the Epics, Prof. Eventually another one will set up here. You think he’ll be *better* than Steelheart?”

“Enough, Megan,” Prof said. “We’ve spoken of this already, and I made my decision.”

“Newcago is one of the best places in the Fractured States to live,” Megan continued, ignoring Prof’s comment. “We should be focusing on Epics who *aren’t* good administrators, places where life is worse.”

“No,” Prof said, his voice sounding gruffer.

“Why not?”

“Because that’s the problem!” he snapped. “Everyone talks about how great Newcago is. But it’s *not* great, Megan. It’s good by comparison only! Yes, there are worse places, but so long as this hellhole is considered the ideal, we’ll never get anywhere. *We cannot let them convince us this is normal!*”

The room fell still, Megan looking taken aback by Prof’s outburst. I sat down, my shoulders slumping.

This wasn’t anything like I’d imagined. The glorious Reckoners, bringing justice to the Epics. I hadn’t once thought of the guilt they’d bear, the arguments, the uncertainty. I could see it in them, the same fear I’d had in the power plant. The worry that we might be making things worse, that we might end up as bad as the Epics.

Prof stalked away, waving a hand in frustration. I heard the curtain rustle as he retreated back to his thinking room. Megan watched him go, red-faced with anger.

“It is not so bad, Megan,” Abraham said quietly. He still

seemed calm. “It will be all right.”

“How can you say that?” she asked.

“We don’t need to defeat all of the Epics, you see,” Abraham said. He was holding a chain in his dark-skinned hand, with a small pendant dangling from it. “We just need to hold out long enough.”

“I’m not going to listen to your foolishness, Abraham,” she said. “Not right now.” With that she turned and left the storage room. She crawled into the tunnel that led down to the steel catacombs and vanished.

Abraham sighed, then turned to me. “You look unwell, David.”

“I feel sick,” I said honestly. “I thought … well, if anyone had the answers, I thought it would be the Reckoners.”

“You mistake us,” Abraham said, walking over to me. “You mistake Prof. Do not look to the executioner for the reason his blade falls. And Prof *is* society’s executioner, the warrior for mankind. Others will come to rebuild.”

“But doesn’t it bother you?” I asked.

“Not unduly,” Abraham answered simply, putting his necklace back on. “But then, I have a hope the others do not.”

I could now see the pendant he wore. It was small and silver, with a stylized *S* symbol on it. I thought I recognized that symbol from somewhere. It reminded me of my father.

“You’re one of the Faithful,” I guessed. I’d heard of them, though I’d never met one. The Factory raised realists, not dreamers, and to be one of the Faithful you had to be a dreamer.

Abraham nodded.

“How can you still believe that good Epics will come?” I asked. “I mean, it’s been over ten years.”

“Ten years is not so long,” Abraham said. “Not in the big picture of things. Why, humankind is not so old a species, compared to the big picture! The heroes *will* come. Someday we will have Epics that do not kill, do not hate, do not dominate. We will be protected.”

Idiot, I thought. It was a gut reaction, though I immediately felt bad about it. Abraham wasn’t an idiot. He was a wise man, or had seemed so until this moment. But … how could he really still think there would be *good* Epics? It was the same reasoning that had gotten my father killed.

Though at least he has something to look forward to, I thought.

Would it be so bad, to wish for some mythical group of heroic Epics—to wait for them to come and provide salvation?

Abraham squeezed my shoulder and gave me a smile, then walked away. I stood and caught sight of him following Prof into the thinking room, something I'd never seen any of the others do. I soon heard soft conversation.

I shook my head. I considered continuing with the unloading, but found I didn't have a heart for it. I glanced at the tunnel down to the catacombs. On a whim I climbed in and went to see if I could find Megan.

24

MEGAN hadn't gone far. I found her at the bottom of the tunnel, sitting on a pile of old crates just outside the hideout. I walked up, hesitantly, and she shot me a suspicious glance. Her expression softened after a moment, and she turned back to studying the darkness in front of her. She had her mobile turned all the way up to give light.

I climbed up on the crates beside her and sat, but didn't speak. I wanted to have the perfect thing to say, and—as usual—I couldn't figure out what that would be. Trouble was, I basically agreed with Prof, even though it made me feel guilty that I did. I didn't have the schooling to predict what would happen to Newcago if its leader were killed. But I *did* know Steelheart was evil. No court would convict him, but I had a right to seek justice for the things he had done to me and mine.

So I just sat there, trying to formulate something to say that wouldn't offend her but that also wouldn't sound lame. It's harder than it seems—which is probably why I just say what comes to me most of the time. When I stop to think, I can never come up with anything.

"He really is a monster," Megan eventually said. "I know that he is. I hate sounding like I'm defending him. I just don't know if killing him is going to be good for the very people we're trying to protect."

I nodded. I got it, I really did. We fell silent again. As we sat I could hear distant sounds in the corridors, distorted by the bizarre composition and acoustics of the steel catacombs. Sometimes you could hear water rushing, as the city sewage pipes

ran nearby. Other times I swore I could hear rats, though it baffled me what they could be living on down here. Other times the land seemed to be groaning softly.

"What *are* they, Megan?" I asked. "Have you ever wondered that?"

"You mean the Epics?" she asked. "Lots of people have theories."

"I know. But what do you think?"

She didn't reply immediately. Lots of people did have theories, and most would be happy to tell you about them. The Epics were the next stage in human evolution, or they were a punishment sent by this god or that, or they were really aliens. Or they were the result of a secret government project. Or it was all fake and they were using technology to pretend they had powers.

Most of the theories fell apart when confronted by facts. Normal people had gained powers and become Epics; they weren't aliens or anything like that. There were enough direct stories of a family member manifesting abilities. Scientists claimed to be baffled by the genetics of Epics, but I didn't know much about that kind of thing. Besides, most of the scientists were either gone now or worked for one of the more powerful Epics.

Anyway, a lot of the rumors were silly, but that had never stopped them from spreading, and probably never would.

"I think they're a test of some kind," Megan said.

I frowned. "You mean, like religiously?"

"No, not a test of faith or anything like that," Megan said. "I mean a test of what we'll do, if we have power. Enormous power. What would it do to us? How would we deal with it?"

I sniffed. "If the Epics are an example of what we'd do with power, then it's better if we never get any."

She fell silent. A few moments later I heard another odd sound. Whistling.

I turned and was surprised to see Cody walking down the corridor. He was alone, and on foot, which meant he'd left the industrial scooter—which had pulled the crates of supplies—in the hangar. He had his gun over his shoulder and wore his baseball cap embroidered with the supposed coat of arms of his Scottish clan. He tipped the cap to us.

"So … we having a party?" he asked. He checked his mobile.

“Is it time for tea?”

“Tea?” I asked. “I’ve never seen you drink tea.”

“I usually have some fish sticks and a bag of potato chips,” Cody said. “It’s a British thing. Y’all are Yanks and wouldn’t understand.”

Something seemed off about that statement, but I didn’t know enough to call him on it.

“So why the dour expressions?” Cody asked, hopping up beside us on the crates. “You two look like a pair of coon hunters on a rainy day.”

Wow, I thought. *Why can’t I come up with metaphors like that?*

“Prof and I got into an argument,” Megan said with a sigh.

“Again? I thought you two were past that. What was it about this time?”

“Nothing I want to talk about.”

“Fair enough, fair enough.” Cody got out his long hunter’s knife and began trimming his fingernails. “Nightwielder’s been out in the city. People are reporting him all over, passing through walls, looking in on dens of miscreants and lesser Epics. It has everyone on edge.”

“That’s good,” I said. “It means Steelheart is taking the threat seriously.”

“Maybe,” Cody said. “Maybe. He ain’t said anything about the challenge we left him yet, and Nightwielder is checking in on a lot of regular folks. Steelheart might suspect that someone’s trying to blow smoke up his kilt.”

“Maybe we should hit Nightwielder,” I said. “We know his weakness now.”

“Might be a good idea,” Cody said, fishing a long, slender device out of his hip pack. He tossed it to me.

“What’s this?”

“UV flashlight,” he said. “I managed to find a place that sold them—or, well, bulbs anyway, which I put in the flashlights and fixed us up a few. Best to be ready in case Nightwielder surprises us.”

“Do you think he’ll come here?” I asked.

“He’ll start in on the steel catacombs eventually,” Cody said. “Maybe he’s started already. Having a defensible base means nothing if Nightwielder just decides to phase through the walls and strangle us in our sleep.”

Cheery thoughts. I shivered.

"At least we can fight him now," Cody said, fishing out another flashlight for Megan. "But I think we're poorly prepared. We still don't know what Steelheart's weakness is. What if he *does* challenge Limelight?"

"Tia will find the answer," I said. "She has a lot of leads in discovering what was in that bank vault."

"And Firefight?" Cody said. "We haven't even *started* planning how to deal with him."

Firefight, the other of Steelheart's High Epic bodyguards. Megan looked at me, obviously curious as to what I'd say next.

"Firefight won't be a problem," I said.

"So you said before, when you pitched this whole thing to us. But you ain't said why yet."

"I've talked it over with Tia," I said. "Firefight's not what you think he is." I was reasonably confident about that. "Come on, I'll show you."

Cody raised an eyebrow but followed as I crawled back up the tunnel. Prof already knew what my notes said, though I wasn't certain he believed. I knew he was planning a meeting to talk about Firefight and Nightwielder, but I *also* knew that he was waiting on Tia before moving too far ahead in the plan. If she didn't come up with the answer to how to kill Steelheart, nothing else would matter.

I didn't want to think about that. Giving up now because we didn't know his weakness … it would be like finding out that you'd drawn lots for dessert at the Factory and been only one number off. Only it didn't matter, because Pete already snuck in to steal the dessert, so nobody was going to get any anyway—not even Pete, because it turns out that there had never been any dessert in the first place. Well, something like that. That metaphor's a work in progress.

At the top of the tunnel I led Cody to the box where we kept my notes. I flipped through them for a few minutes, noting that Megan had followed us up. She had an unreadable expression on her face.

I grabbed the folder on Firefight and brought it over to the desk, spreading out some pictures. "What do you know about Firefight?"

"Fire Epic," Cody said, pointing at a photo. It showed a person

made of flames, the heat so intense the air around him warped. No photo could capture the details of Firefight's features, as they were composed of solid flames. In fact, each photo I pulled out showed him glowing so brightly that it distorted the picture.

"He's got standard fire Epic powers," Megan said. "He can turn to flame—in fact, he pretty much always remains in fire form. He can fly, throw fire from his hands, and manipulate existing flames. He creates an intense heat field around him, capable of melting bullets—though they likely couldn't hurt him even if they didn't melt. It's a basic fire Epic portfolio."

"Too basic," I said. "Every Epic has quirks. Nobody has *exactly* the same portfolio of powers. That was what first tipped me off. Here's the other clue." I tapped the series of photographs—each was a shot of Firefight taken on a different day, usually with Steelheart and his retinue. Though Nightwielder often went out on missions, Firefight usually remained near Steelheart to act as first-line bodyguard.

"Do you see it?" I asked.

"See what?" Cody asked.

"Here," I said, pointing to a man standing with Steelheart's guards in one of the pictures. He was slender and clean-shaven and wore a stiff suit, a pair of dark shades, and a wide-brimmed hat that obscured his face.

I pointed to the next photo. The same person was there. And the next photo. And the next. His face was hard to make out in the other pictures too—none of them were focused on him specifically, and the hat and shades always masked his features.

"This person is always there when Firefight appears," I said. "It's suspicious. Who is it, and what is he doing there?"

Megan frowned. "What are you implying?"

"Here," I said, "take a look at these." I got out a sequence of five photos, a rapid-fire series of shots capturing a few moments. The scene was Steelheart flying through the city with a procession of his minions. He did that sometimes. Though he always looked like he was going somewhere important, I suspected these were really just his version of a parade.

Nightwielder and Firefight were with him, flying about ten feet above the ground. A cavalcade of cars drove beneath, like a military convoy. I couldn't make out any faces, though I suspected the suspicious person was among them.

Five pictures. Four of them showed the trio of Epics flying side by side. And in one of them—right in the middle of the sequence—Firefight's shape had fuzzed and gone translucent.

"Firefight can go incorporeal, like Nightwielder?" Cody guessed.

"No," I said. "Firefight's not real."

Cody blinked. "What?"

"He's not real. At least, not in the way we think. Firefight is an incredibly intricate—and incredibly clever—illusion. I suspect that the person we're seeing in those photos, the one wearing the suit and hat, is the true Epic. He's an illusionist, capable of manipulating light to create images, a lot like Refractionary—only on a much more powerful level. Together the real Firefight and Steelheart concocted the idea of a fake Epic much the same way we're concocting Limelight. In these photos we're catching a moment of distraction, when the real Epic wasn't concentrating on his illusion and it wobbled and nearly vanished."

"A fake Epic?" Megan said, dismissive. "What would be the point? Steelheart wouldn't need to do that."

"Steelheart has a strange psychology," I said. "Trust me. I'll bet I know him better than anyone other than his closest allies. He's arrogant, like Abraham said, but he's *also* paranoid. Much of what he does is about holding on to power, about forcing people into line. He moves the location of his sleeping quarters. Why would he need to do that? He's immune to harm, right? He's paranoid, scared that someone will discover his weakness. He destroyed the entire bank because we might have had a *hint* at how he was hurt."

"Lots of Epics would do that," Cody noted.

"That's because most Epics are equally paranoid. Look, what better way to surprise would-be assassins than to make them prepare for an Epic that isn't there? If they spend all their time planning how to kill Firefight, then go up against an illusionist instead, they'll be caught totally off guard."

"So will we, if you're right," Cody said. "Fighting illusionists is tough. I hate not being able to trust my eyes."

"Look, an illusionist Epic can't explain everything," Megan said. "There are recorded events of Firefight melting bullets."

"Firefight made the bullets vanish when they reached the illusion, then made illusory melted bullets drop to the ground.

Later some of Steelheart's minions went and spread some actual melted bullets down as proof." I took out another pair of pictures. "I've got evidence of them doing just that. I have mountains of documentation on this, Megan. You're welcome to read through it. Tia agrees with me."

I picked up a few more pictures from the stack. "Take this. Here, we've got photos of a time that Firefight 'burned' down a building. I took these pictures myself; see how he's throwing fire? If you look at the scorch marks on the walls the following day in this next set, they're different from the blasts Firefight created. The real scorch marks were added by a team of workers in the night. They cleared everyone from the scene, so I couldn't get pictures of them, but the next day's evidence is clear."

Megan looked deeply troubled.

"What?" Cody said.

"It's what you said," she replied. "Illusionists. They're annoying. I'm just hoping we don't have to face one."

"I don't think we'll have to," I said. "I've thought it through and, despite Firefight's reputation, he doesn't seem terribly dangerous. I can't squarely attribute any deaths to him, and he rarely fights. It has to be because he wants to be careful not to reveal what he really is. I've got the facts in these folders. As soon as Firefight appears, all we have to do is shoot the one creating the illusion—this man in the photos—and all of his illusions will go down. It shouldn't be too hard."

"Y'all might be right about the illusions," Cody said, looking through another group of photos. "But I'm not sure about this person you think is making them. If Firefight were smart, he'd create the illusion, then turn himself invisible."

"It's possible he can't," I said. "Not all illusionists are capable of that, even powerful ones." I hesitated. "But you're right. We can't know for certain who's making the fake Firefight, but I still think Firefight won't be a problem. All we need to do is spook him—set up a trap that will expose his illusion as fake. When he's threatened with being revealed, I'll bet he bolts. From what I've been able to determine about him, he seems like something of a coward."

Cody nodded thoughtfully.

Megan shook her head. "I think you're taking this too lightly." She sounded angry. "If Steelheart really has been fooling

everyone all this time, then it's likely that Firefight is even more dangerous than we thought. Something about this bothers me; I don't think we're prepared for it."

"You're looking for a reason to call off this mission anyway," I said, annoyed at her.

"I never said that."

"You didn't need to. It—"

I was interrupted by motion at the tunnel into the hideout and I turned in time to see Tia climbing through, wearing old jeans and her Reckoner jacket. Her knees were dusty. She stood up, smiling.

"We've found it."

My heart leaped in my chest and sent what felt like electricity jolting through my body. "Steelheart's weakness? You found out what it is?"

"No," she said, her eyes seeming to glow with excitement. "But this should lead to the answers. I found it."

"What, Tia?" Cody asked.

"The bank vault."

25

“I first started considering this possibility when you told your story, David,” Tia explained. The entire team of Reckoners was following her down a tunnel in the steel catacombs. “And the more I investigated the bank, the more curious I became. There are oddities.”

“Oddities?” I asked. The group moved in a tense huddle, Cody taking point, Abraham watching our tail. He had replaced his very nice machine gun with a similar one, only without quite as many bells and whistles.

I felt pretty comfortable with him at our back. These narrow confines would make a heavy machine gun especially deadly to anyone trying to approach us; the walls would work like bumpers on the sides of a bowling lane, and Abraham wouldn’t have any trouble at all getting strikes.

“The Diggers,” Prof said. He was at my side. “They weren’t allowed to excavate the area beneath where the bank had stood.”

“Yes,” Tia said, speaking eagerly. “It was very irregular. Steelheart barely gave them any direction. The chaos of these lower catacombs proves that; their madness made them hard to control. But one order he was firm on: the area beneath the bank was to be left alone. I wouldn’t have thought twice about that if it hadn’t been for what you described, that Steelheart had most of the main room of the bank turned to steel by the time Faultline came that afternoon. Her powers had two parts, it—”

“Yes,” I said, too excited not to interrupt. Faultline—the woman Steelheart had brought to bury the bank after I’d escaped. “I know. Power duality—melding two second-tier abilities creates

a first-tier one."

Tia smiled. "You've been reading my classification system notes."

"I figure we might as well use the same terminology." I shrugged. "I have no trouble switching over."

Megan glanced at me, the hint of a smile on the corners of her lips. "What?" I asked.

"Nerd."

"I am not—"

"Stay focused, son," Prof said, shooting a hard look at Megan, whose eyes shone with amusement. "I happen to have a fondness for nerds."

"I never said that I didn't," Megan replied lightly. "I'm just interested whenever someone pretends to be something they're not."

Whatever, I thought. Faultline was a tier-one Epic, by Tia's classification, without an immortality benefit. That made her powerful, but fragile. She should have realized that; when she'd tried to seize Newcago a few years back, she'd never had a chance.

Anyway, she was an Epic who had several smaller powers that worked together to create what seemed to be a single, more impressive power. In her case, she could move earth—but only if it wasn't too rigid. However, she *also* had the ability to turn ordinary stone and earth into a kind of sandy dust.

What had looked like her creating an earthquake had actually been her softening the ground, then pulling back the earth. There were true earthquake-creating Epics, but they were ironically less powerful—or at least less useful. The stronger ones could destroy a city with their powers but couldn't bury a single building or group of people at will. Plate tectonics just worked on too massive a scale to allow for precision.

"Don't you see?" Tia asked. "Steelheart turned the bank's main room—walls, much of the ceiling, floor—to steel. Then Faultline softened the ground beneath it and let it sink. I began thinking, there might be a chance that—"

"—that it would still be there," I said softly. We turned a corner in the catacombs, and then Tia stepped forward, moving some pieces of junk to reveal a tunnel. I had enough practice by now to tell it was probably tensor-made. The tensors, unless controlled

precisely, always created circular tunnels, while the Diggers had created square or rectangular corridors.

This tunnel burrowed through the steel at a slight decline. Cody walked up, shining his light in. “Well, I guess now we know what you and Abraham have been working on for the last few weeks, Tia.”

“We had to try several different avenues of approach,” Tia explained. “I wasn’t certain how deep the bank room ended up sinking, or even if it retained structural integrity.”

“But it did?” I asked, suddenly feeling a strange numbness.

“It did!” Tia said. “It’s amazing. Come see.” She led the way down the tunnel, which was tall enough to walk through, though Abraham would have to stoop.

I hesitated. The others waited for me to follow, so I forced myself forward, joining Tia. The rest of them came along behind, our mobiles providing the only light.

No, wait. There was light up ahead; I could barely make it out, around the shadows of Tia’s slender figure. We eventually reached the end of the tunnel, and I stepped into a memory.

Tia had set up a few lights in corners and on tables, but they did little more than give a ghostly cast to the large, dark chamber. The room had settled at an angle, with the floor sloping downward. The skewed perspective only enhanced the surreal sensation of this place.

I froze in the mouth of the tunnel. The room was as I remembered it, shockingly well preserved. Towering pillars—now made of steel—and scattered desks, counters, rubble. I could still make out the tile mosaic on the floor, though only its shape. Instead of marble and stone it was now all a uniform shade of silver broken by ridges and bumps.

There was almost no dust, though some motes dodged lazily in the air, creating little halos around the white lanterns Tia had set up.

Realizing that I was still standing in the mouth of the tunnel, I stepped down into the room. *Oh sparks* …, I thought, my chest constricting. I found my hands gripping my rifle, though I knew I was in no danger. The memories were coming back in a flood.

“In retrospect,” Tia was explaining—I listened with only half an ear—“I shouldn’t have been surprised to find it so well preserved. Faultline’s powers created a kind of cushion of earth as the room

sank, and Steelheart turned almost all of that earth to metal. The other rooms in the building were destroyed in his assault on the bank, and they broke off as the structure sank. But this one, and the attached vault, were ironically preserved by Steelheart's own powers."

By coincidence we'd entered through the front of the bank. There had been wide, beautiful glass doors here; those had been destroyed in the gunfire and energy blasts. Steel rubble and some steel bones from Deathpoint's victims littered the ground to both sides. As I stepped forward I followed the path Steelheart had taken into the building.

Those are the counters, I thought, looking directly ahead. *The ones where the tellers worked.* One section had been destroyed; as a child I'd crawled through that gap before making my way to the vault. The ceiling nearby was broken and misshapen, but the vault itself had been steel before Steelheart's intervention. Now that I thought about it, that might have helped preserve its contents, because of how his transfersion abilities worked.

"Most of the rubble is from where the ceiling fell in," Tia said from behind, her voice echoing in the vast chamber. "Abraham and I cleaned as much out as we could. A large amount of dirt had tumbled through the broken wall and ceiling, filling one part of the chamber over by the vault. We used the tensors on that pile, then made a hole in the corner of the floor—it opens into a pocket of space underneath the building—and shoved the dust in there."

I moved down three steps to the lower section of the floor. Here, in the center of the room, was where Steelheart had faced Deathpoint. *These people are mine.…* By instinct, I turned to the left. Huddling beside the pillar I found the body of the woman whose child had been killed in her arms. I shivered. She was now a statue made of steel. When had she died? How? I didn't remember. A stray bullet, maybe? She wouldn't have been turned to steel unless she'd already been dead.

"What *really* saved this place," Tia continued, "was the Great Transfersion, when Steelheart turned everything in the city to steel. If he hadn't done that, dirt would have filled this room completely. Beyond that, the settling of the ground probably would have caved in the ceiling. However, the transfersion turned the remaining things in the room to steel, as well as the earth

around it. In effect he locked the room into place, preserving it, like a bubble in the middle of a frozen pond."

I continued forward until I could see the sterile little mortgage cubicle I'd hidden in. Its windows were now opaque, but I could see in through the open front. I walked in and ran my fingers along the desk. The cubicle felt smaller than I remembered.

"The insurance records were inconclusive," Tia continued. "But there *was* a claim submitted on the building itself, an earthquake claim. I wonder if the bank owners really thought the insurance company would pay out on that. Seems ridiculous—but of course, there was still a lot of uncertainty surrounding Epics in those days. Anyway, that made me investigate records surrounding the bank's destruction."

"And that led you here?" Cody asked, his voice coming from the darkness as he poked around the perimeter of the room.

"No, actually. It led me to find something curious. A cover-up. The reason I couldn't find anything in the insurance reports, and why I couldn't find any lists of what was in the vault, was because some of Steelheart's people had already gathered and hidden the information. I realized that since he had made a dedicated attempt to cover this up, I would never discover anything of use in the records. Our only chance would be to come to the bank, which Steelheart had assumed was buried beyond reach."

"It's a good assumption," Cody said, sounding thoughtful. "Without the tensors—or some kind of Epic power like the Diggers had—getting here would have been near impossible. Burrowing through fifty feet of solid steel?" The Diggers had started out as normal humans and had been granted their strange powers by an Epic known as Digzone, who was a gifter like Conflux. It … hadn't gone well for them. Not all Epic powers were meant to be used by mortal hands, it appeared.

I was still standing in the cubicle. The mortgage man's bones were there, scattered on the floor around the desk, peeking out from some rubble. All of it was metal now.

I didn't want to look, but I had to. I *had to*.

I turned around. For a moment I couldn't tell the past from the present. My father stood there, determined, gun raised to defend a monster. Explosions, shouts, dust, screams, fire.

Fear.

I blinked, trembling, hand to the cold steel of the cubicle wall. The room smelled of dust and age, but I thought I could smell blood. I thought I could smell terror.

I stepped out of the cubicle and walked to where Steelheart had stood, holding a simple pistol, arm extended toward my father. Bang. One shot. I could remember hearing it, though I didn't know if my mind had constructed that. I'd been deafened by the explosions by then.

I knelt beside the pillar. A mound of silvery rubble covered everything in front of me, but I had my tensor. The others continued talking, but I stopped paying attention, and their words became nothing more than a low hum in the background. I put on my tensor, then reached forward and—very carefully—began vaporizing bits of rubble.

It didn't take long; the bulk of it was made of one large piece of ceiling panel. I destroyed it, then froze.

There he was.

My father lay slumped against the pillar, head to the side. The bullet wound was frozen in the steel folds of his shirt. His eyes were still open. He looked like a statue, cast with incredible detail—even the pores of the skin were clear.

I stared, unable to move, unable to even lower my arm. After ten years, the familiar face was almost crushing to me. I didn't have any pictures of him or my mother; I hadn't dared go home after surviving, though Steelheart couldn't have known who I was. I'd been paranoid and traumatized.

Seeing his face brought that all back to me. He looked so … normal. Normal in a way that hadn't existed for years; normal in a way that the world didn't deserve any longer.

I wrapped my arms around myself, but I kept looking at my father's face. I couldn't turn away.

"David?" Prof's voice. He knelt down beside me.

"My father …," I whispered. "He died fighting back, but he also died protecting Steelheart. And now here I am, trying to kill the thing he rescued. It's funny, eh?"

Prof didn't respond.

"In a way," I said, "this is all his fault. Deathpoint was going to kill Steelheart from behind."

"It wouldn't have worked," Prof said. "Deathpoint didn't know how powerful Steelheart was. Nobody knew back then."

“I guess that’s true. But my father was a fool. He couldn’t believe that Steelheart was evil.”

“Your father believed the best about people,” Prof said. “You could call that foolish, but I’d never call it a fault. He was a hero, son. He stood up to, and killed, Deathpoint—an Epic who had been slaughtering wantonly. If, in doing so, he let Steelheart live … well, Steelheart hadn’t done terrible things at that point. Your father couldn’t know the future. You can’t be so frightened of what *might* happen that you are unwilling to act.”

I stared into my father’s dead eyes, and I found myself nodding. “That’s the answer,” I whispered. “It’s the answer to what you and Megan were arguing about.”

“It isn’t her answer,” Prof said. “But it’s mine. And maybe yours too.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze, then went to join the rest of the Reckoners, who were standing near the vault.

I’d never expected to see my father’s face again; I’d left that day feeling like a coward, seeing him mouth the plea for me to run and escape. I’d lived ten years with a single dominating emotion: the need for vengeance. The need to prove I was not a coward.

Now, here he was. Looking into those steel eyes, I knew my father wouldn’t care about vengeance. But he’d kill Steelheart all the same if he had the chance, to stop the murders. Because sometimes, you need to help the heroes along.

I stood up. Somehow I knew, in that moment, that the bank vault and its contents were a false lead. That hadn’t been the source of Steelheart’s weakness. It had been my father, or something about him.

I left the corpse for the moment, joining the others. “… very careful as we open the vault boxes,” Tia was saying. “We don’t want to destroy what might be inside.”

“I don’t think it will work,” I said, drawing all of their eyes. “I don’t think the vault contents are to blame.”

“You said Steelheart looked at the vault after the rocket blew it open,” Tia said. “And his agents worked very hard to obtain and hide any lists of what was in here.”

“I don’t think he knew how he got hurt,” I said. “A lot of Epics don’t know their weaknesses at first. He quietly had his people gather those records and analyze them so he could try to figure it out.”

“So maybe he found the answer there,” Cody said with a shrug.

I raised an eyebrow. “If he’d found out this vault contained something that made him vulnerable, do you think this place would still be here?”

The others grew silent. No, it wouldn’t still be there. If that had been the case, Steelheart would have burrowed down and destroyed the place, no matter the difficulty in doing so. I was increasingly certain that it wasn’t an object that had made him weak; it was something about the situation.

Tia’s face looked dark; she probably wished I’d mentioned this before she spent days excavating. I couldn’t help it, though, since nobody had told me what she was doing.

“Well,” Prof said. “We’re going to search this vault. David’s theory has merit, but so does the theory that something in here weakened him.”

“Will we even be able to find anything?” Cody asked. “Everything’s been turned to steel. I don’t know that I’ll be able to recognize much if it’s all fused together.”

“Some things might have survived in their original form,” Megan said. “In fact, it’s likely that they did. Steelheart’s transfersion powers are insulated by metal.”

“They’re what?” Cody asked.

“Insulated by metal,” I repeated. “He exerts a kind of … ripple of transfersion that travels through and changes nonmetal substances like sound travels through air or waves move through a pool of water. If the wave hits metal—particularly iron or steel—it stops. He can affect other kinds of metal, but the wave moves more slowly. Steel stops it entirely.”

“So these safe-deposit boxes …,” Cody said, stepping into the vault.

“Might have insulated their contents,” Megan finished, following him in. “Some of it will have been transformed—the wave that created the transfersion was enormously powerful. I think we might find something, though, particularly since the vault itself was metal and would work as a primary insulator.” She glanced over her shoulder and caught me looking at her. “What?” she demanded.

“Nerd,” I said.

Uncharacteristically, she blushed furiously. “I pay attention to Steelheart. I wanted to be familiar with his powers, since we were

coming into the city."

"I didn't say it was a bad thing," I said lightly, stepping into the vault and raising my tensor. "I just pointed it out."

Never has getting glared at felt so good.

Prof chuckled. "All right," he said. "Cody, Abraham, David, vaporize the fronts of the safe-deposit boxes but *don't* destroy the contents. Tia, Megan, and I will start pulling them out and going through them for anything that looks interesting. Let's get to work; this is going to take a while.…"

26

“WELL,” Cody said, looking over the heap of gemstones and jewelry, “if this achieved nothing else, it at least made me rich. That’s a failure I can live with.”

Tia snorted, picking through the jewelry. We four, including Prof, sat around a large desk in one of the cubicles. Megan and Abraham were on guard duty, watching the tunnel into the bank chamber.

There was a hallowed feeling to the room—like I somehow had to show respect—and I think the others must have sensed it too. They spoke in low, muted voices. All except Cody. He tried to lean back on his chair as he held up a large ruby, but—of course—the steel chair legs were fused to the steel floor.

“That once might have made you rich, Cody,” Tia said, “but you’d have some trouble selling it now.”

That was true. Jewelry was practically worthless these days. There were a couple Epics who could create gemstones.

“Maybe,” Cody said, “but gold remains a standard.” He scratched his head. “Not sure why, though. You can’t eat it, which is all most people are interested in.”

“It’s familiar,” Prof said. “It doesn’t rust, it’s easy to shape, and it’s hard to fake. There aren’t any Epics who can make it. Yet. People need to have a way to trade, particularly across kingdom or city boundaries.” He fingered a gold chain. “Cody’s actually right.”

“I am?” Cody looked surprised.

Prof nodded. “Whether or not we take on Steelheart, the gold we’ve recovered here can fund the Reckoners for a few years on

its own."

Tia set her notebook on the desk, tapping it absently with her pen. On the other mortgage cubicle desks we'd arranged what we'd found in the vault. About three-quarters of the boxes' contents had been recoverable.

"Mostly we have a lot of wills," Tia said, opening a can of cola, "stock certificates, passports, copies of driver's licenses …"

"We could fill a whole city with fake people if we wanted," Cody said. "Imagine the fun."

"The second-largest grouping," Tia continued, "is the aforementioned pile of jewelry, both valuable and worthless. If something in there affected Steelheart, then by pure volume this is the most likely group."

"But it's not," I said.

Prof sighed. "David, I know what you—"

"What I mean," I interrupted, "is that jewelry doesn't make sense. Steelheart didn't attack other banks, and he hasn't done anything—either directly or indirectly—to forbid people from wearing jewelry in his presence. Jewelry is common enough among Epics that he'd have to take measures."

"I agree," Tia said, "though only in part. It's possible we've missed something. Steelheart has proven subtle in the past; perhaps he has a secret embargo on a certain type of gemstone. I'll look into it, but I think David's right. If something *did* affect Steelheart, then it's likely one of the oddities."

"How many of those are there?" Prof asked.

"Over three hundred," Tia said with a grimace. "Mostly mementos or keepsakes of no intrinsic value. Anything among them could be our culprit, theoretically. But then there's a chance it was something one of the people in the room was carrying on them. Or it could be, as David seems to think, something about the situation."

"It's very rare for an Epic's weakness to be influenced just by proximity to something mundane," I said, shrugging. "Unless an object in the vault emitted a kind of radiation or a light or a sound—something that actually reached Steelheart—the chances are slim it was the culprit."

"Look through the items anyway, Tia," Prof said. "Maybe we can find a correlation to something Steelheart has done in the city."

“What about the darkness?” Cody asked.

“Nightwielder’s darkness?”

“Sure,” Cody said. “I’ve always thought it was strange that he kept it so dark here.”

“That’s probably because of Nightwielder himself,” I said. “He doesn’t want sunlight shining on him and making him corporeal. I wouldn’t be surprised if that was part of the deal between them, one of the reasons Nightwielder serves beneath Steelheart. Steelheart’s government provides infrastructure—food, electricity, crime prevention—to compensate for it always being dark.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Cody said. “Nightwielder needs darkness, but can’t have it unless he’s got a good city to work from. Kind of like a piper needs a good city to support him, so he can stand on the cliff tops and play.”

“A … piper?” I asked.

“Oh please, don’t get him started,” Tia said, raising a hand to her head.

“Bagpiper,” Cody said.

I looked at him blankly.

“You’ve never heard of *bagpipes*?” Cody asked, sounding aghast. “They’re as Scottish as kilts and red armpit hair!”

“Um … yuck?” I said.

“That’s it,” Cody said. “Steelheart has to fall so we can get back to educating children properly. This is an offense against the dignity of my motherland.”

“Great,” Prof said, “I’m glad we now have proper motivation.” He tapped the desk idly.

“You’re worried,” Tia said. She seemed to be able to read Prof pretty well.

“We’re getting closer and closer to a confrontation. If we continue on this course we’ll draw Steelheart out but will be unable to fight him.”

The people at the desk grew still. I looked up, gazing at the high ceiling; the sterile white lights around the room provided insufficient glow to reach the room’s farthest corners. It was cold in this room, and quiet. “When’s the last moment we could pull out?”

“Well,” Prof said, “we could draw him to a confrontation with Limelight, then not show.”

“That might be kind of fun on its own merits,” Cody noted. “I

doubt Steelheart gets stood up very often."

"He'd react poorly to the embarrassment," Prof said. "Right now the Reckoners are a thorn—an annoyance. We've only done three hits in his city and have never killed anyone vital to his organization. If we run, what we've been doing will get out. Abraham and I set in place evidence that will prove we're behind this—that is the only way to make sure our victory, if we obtain one, isn't attributed to an Epic instead of ordinary men."

"So if we run …," Cody said.

"Steelheart will know that Limelight was a fake and that the Reckoners were working on a way to assassinate him," Tia said.

"Well," Cody said, "most Epics already want to kill the lot of us. So maybe nothing will change."

"This will be worse," I said, still looking up at the ceiling. "He killed the *rescue workers*, Cody. He's paranoid. He'll hunt us actively if he finds out what we've been up to. The thought that we tried to get to him … that we were researching his weakness … he won't take that sitting down."

The shadows flickered, and I looked down to see Abraham walking up to our cubicle. "Prof, you asked me to warn you when we reached the hour."

Prof checked his mobile, then nodded. "We should be getting back to the hideout. Everyone grab a sack and fill it with the things we found. We'll sort through them further in a more controlled environment."

We got up from our seats, Cody patting the head of the dead—and steel-frozen—bank patron who slumped beside the wall of this particular cubicle. As they left, Abraham set something down on the desk. "For you."

It was a handgun. "I'm no good with …" I trailed off. It looked familiar. *The gun … the one my father picked up*.

"I found it in the rubble beside your father," Abraham said. "The transfersion turned the grip and frame to metal, but most of the parts were already good steel. I removed the magazine and cleared the chamber, and the slide and trigger still function as expected. I wouldn't completely trust it until I give it a thorough once-over back at base, but there's a good chance it will fire reliably."

I picked up the gun. This was the weapon that had killed my father. Holding it felt wrong.

But it was also, so far as I knew, the only weapon ever to have wounded Steelheart.

"We can't know if it was something about the gun that allowed Steelheart to be hurt," Abraham said. "I felt it would be worth digging out. I'll take it apart and clean it for you, check over the cartridges. They should still be good, though I might need to change the powder, if the casings didn't insulate against the transfersion. If it all checks out, you can carry it. If the opportunity presents itself, you can try shooting him with it."

I nodded in thanks, then ran to get a sack and haul out my part of what we'd found.

"Piping is the most sublime sound y'all have ever heard," Cody explained, gesturing widely as we walked down the corridor toward the hideout. "A sonorous mix of power, frailty, and wonder."

"It sounds like dying cats being stuffed into a blender," Tia said to me.

Cody looked wistful. "Aye, and a beauteous melody that is, lass."

"So, wait," I said, holding up a finger. "These bagpipes. To make them, you … what was it you said? 'Y'all need to kill yourself a wee dragon, which are totally real and not at all mythological—they live in the Scottish Highlands to this day.' "

"Aye," Cody said. "It's important y'all pick a *wee* one. The big ones are too dangerous, you see, and their bladders don't make good pipes. But you have to kill it yourself, you see. A piper needs to have slain his own dragon. It's part of the code."

"After that," I said, "you need to cut out the bladder, and attach … what was it?"

"Carved unicorn horns to make the pipes," Cody said. "I mean, you *could* use something less rare, like ivory. But if you're going to be a purist, it has to be unicorn horns."

"Delightful," Tia said.

"A grand word to choose," Cody said. "It, of course, is originally a Scottish term. *Del* coming from Dál Riata, the ancient and great Scottish kingdom of myth. Why, I think one of the great piping songs is from that era. *'Abharsair e d'a chois e na Dùn Èideann.'* "

“Ab … ha … what?” I asked.

“Abharsair e d’a chois e na Dùn Èideann,” Cody said. “It is a sweetly poetic name that doesn’t really translate to English—”

“It means ‘The Devil Went Down to Edinburgh’ in Scottish Gaelic,” Tia said, leaning in toward me but speaking loudly enough that Cody could hear.

Cody, for once, missed a step. “You speak Scottish Gaelic, lass?”

“No,” Tia said. “But I looked that up *last* time you told this story.”

“Er … you did, eh?”

“Yes. Though your translation is questionable.”

“Well, now. I always did say you were a smart one, lass. Yes indeed.” He coughed into his hand. “Ah, look. We’re at the base. I’ll continue the story later.” The others had arrived at the hideout just ahead and Cody scurried up to meet them, then followed Megan up the tunnel.

Tia shook her head, then walked with me to the tunnel. I went last, making sure the cords and cables that hid the entrance were in place. I turned on the hidden motion sensors that would alert us if someone came in, then crawled up myself.

“… just don’t know, Prof,” Abraham was saying in his soft voice. “I just don’t know.” The two of them had spent the trip back walking ahead, speaking softly. I’d tried to edge up to hear them, but Tia had pointedly placed a hand on my shoulder and drawn me back.

“So?” Megan asked, crossing her arms as we all gathered around the main table. “What’s going on?”

“Abraham doesn’t like the way the rumors are going,” Prof said.

“The general public does seem to accept our tale of Limelight,” Abraham said. “They are scared, and our hit on the power station has had an effect—there are rolling blackouts all over the city. However, I see no proof that Steelheart believes. Enforcement is sweeping the understreets. Nightwielder is scouring the city. Everything I hear from informants is that Steelheart is searching for a group of rebels, not a rival Epic.”

“So we hit back with a fury,” Cody said, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall beside the tunnel. “Kill a few more Epics.”

“No,” I said, remembering my conversation with Prof. “We need to be more focused. We can’t just take out random Epics; we have to think like someone trying to capture the city.”

Prof nodded. “Each and every hit we make without having Limelight appear in the open will make Steelheart more suspicious.”

“We’re giving up?” Megan said, a hint of eagerness in her voice, though she obviously tried to cover it.

“Not by a mile,” Prof said. “Perhaps I will still decide we need to pull out—if we aren’t confident enough about Steelheart’s weakness, I might do just that. We aren’t there yet. We’re going to keep on with this plan, but we need to do something big, preferably with an appearance by Limelight. We need to squeeze Steelheart as hard as we can and drive that temper of his. *Force* him out.”

“And we do that how?” Tia asked.

“It’s time to kill Conflux,” Prof said. “And bring down Enforcement.”

27

CONFLUX.

In many ways he was the backbone of Steelheart's rule. A mysterious figure, even when compared to the likes of Firefight and Nightwielder.

I had no good photos of Conflux. The few I'd paid dearly to get were blurry and unspecific. I couldn't even know if he was real.

The van thumped as it moved through the dark streets of Newcago; it was stuffy inside. I sat in the passenger seat, with Megan driving. Cody and Abraham were in the back. Prof was running point in a different vehicle, and Tia was running support back at our base, watching the spy videos of the city streets. It was a frigid day and the heater in our van didn't work—Abraham hadn't gotten around to fixing it.

Prof's words ran through my mind. *We've considered hitting Conflux before, but discarded the idea because we thought it would be too dangerous. We still have the plans we made. It's no less dangerous now, but we're in deep. No reason not to move forward*.

Was Conflux real? My gut said he was. Much as the clues pointed to Firefight being a fabrication, the clues surrounding Conflux added up to *something* being there. A powerful but fragile Epic.

Steelheart moves Conflux around, Prof had said, *never letting him stay long in the same place. But there's a pattern to how he's moved. He often uses an armored limo with six guards and a two-motorcycle escort. If we watch for that, wait until he uses that convoy to move, we can hit him on the streets in transit*.

The clues. Even with power plants Steelheart didn't have

enough electricity to run the city, and yet he somehow produced those fuel cells. The mechanized armor units didn't pack power sources, and neither did many of the copters. The fact that they were powered directly by high-ranking members of Enforcement wasn't much of a secret. Everyone knew it.

He was out there. A gifter who could make energy in a form that could power vehicles, fill fuel cells, even light a large chunk of the city. That level of power was awesome, but no more so than what Nightwielder or Steelheart held. The most powerful Epics set their own scale of strength.

The van bumped, and I gripped my rifle—held low, safety on, barrel pointed down and toward the door. Out of sight, but handy. Just in case.

Tia had spotted the right kind of limo convoy today, and we'd scrambled. Megan drove us toward a point where our road would intersect with Conflux's limo. Her eyes were characteristically intense, though there was a particular edge to her today. Not fear. Just … worry, maybe?

"You don't think we should be doing this, do you?" I asked.

"I think I made that clear," Megan said, her voice even, eyes ahead. "Steelheart doesn't need to fall."

"I'm talking about Conflux specifically," I said. "You're nervous. You're normally not nervous."

"I just don't think we know enough about him," she said. "We shouldn't be hitting an Epic we don't even have photographs of."

"But you *are* nervous."

She drove, eyes forward and hands tight on the wheel.

"It's okay," I said. "I feel like a brick made of porridge."

She looked at me, brow scrunching up. The van's cab fell silent. Then Megan started to laugh.

"No, no," I said. "It makes sense! Listen. A brick is supposed to be strong, right? But if one were secretly made of porridge, and all of the other bricks didn't know, he'd sit around worrying that he'd be weak when the rest of them were strong. He'd get smooshed when he was placed in the wall, you see, maybe get some of his porridge mixed with that stuff they stick between bricks."

Megan was laughing even harder now, so hard she was actually gasping for breath. I tried to keep explaining but found myself smiling. I don't think I'd ever heard her laugh, *really* laugh. Not

chuckle, not part her lips in wry mockery, but truly laugh. She was almost in tears by the time she got control of herself. I think we were fortunate she didn't crash into a post or something.

"David," she said between gasps, "I think that is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard anyone say. The most outlandishly, audaciously ridiculous."

"Um …"

"Sparks," she said, exhaling. "I needed that."

"You did?"

She nodded.

"Can we … pretend that's why I said it, then?"

She looked at me, smiling, eyes sparkling. The tension was still there, but it had retreated somewhat. "Sure," she said. "I mean, bad puns are something of an art, right? So why not bad metaphors?"

"Exactly."

"And if they're an art, you are a master painter."

"Well, actually," I said, "that won't work, you see, because the metaphor makes too much sense. I'd have to be, like, the ace pilot or something." I cocked my head. "Actually, that makes a little bit of sense too." Sparks, doing it badly intentionally was hard too. I found that decidedly unfair.

"Y'all okay up there?" Cody said in our ears. The back of the van was separated from the cab by a metal partition, like a service van. There was a little window in it, but Cody preferred to use the mobiles to communicate.

"We're fine," Megan said. "Just having an abstract conversation about linguistic parallelism."

"You wouldn't be interested," I said. "It doesn't involve Scotsmen."

"Well, actually," Cody said, "the original tongue of my motherland …"

Megan and I looked at each other, then both pointedly reached to our mobiles and muted him.

"Let me know when he's done, Abraham," I said into mine.

Abraham sighed on the other end of the line. "Want to trade places? I'd sure like to be able to mute Cody myself right about now. It is regrettably difficult when he's sitting beside you."

I chuckled, then glanced at Megan. She was still grinning. Seeing her smile made me feel like I'd done something grand.

“Megan,” Tia said in our ears, “keep on straight as you are. The convoy is progressing along the road, without deviations. You should meet up in another fifteen minutes or so.”

“Affirmative.”

Outside the streetlights flickered, as did the lights inside an apartment complex we were passing. Another brownout.

So far there hadn’t been any looting. Enforcement walked the streets, and people were too frightened. Even as we drove past an intersection, I saw a large, mechanized armor unit lumbering down a side street. Twelve feet tall with arms that were little more than machine-gun barrels, the mechanized armor was accompanied by a five-man Enforcement Core. One soldier bore a distinctive energy weapon, painted bright red in warning. A few blasts from that could level a building.

“I’ve always wanted to pilot one of those armor units,” I noted as we drove on.

“It’s not much fun,” Megan said.

“You’ve done it?” I asked, shocked.

“Yeah. They’re stuffy inside, and they respond very sluggishly.” She hesitated. “I’ll admit that firing both rotary guns with wild abandon can be rather fulfilling, in a primal sort of way.”

“We’ll convert you away from those handguns yet.”

“Not a chance,” she said, reaching over and patting her underarm holster. “What if I got stuck in close confines?”

“Then you hit ’em with the stock of the gun,” I said. “If they’re too far away for that, it’s always better to have a gun you can actually *hit* with.”

She gave me a flat stare as she drove. “Rifles take too much time. They’re not … spontaneous enough.”

“This from the woman who complains when people improvise.”

“I complain when *you* improvise,” she said. “That’s different from improvising myself. Besides, not all handguns are inaccurate. Have you ever fired an MT 318?”

“Nice gun, that,” I admitted. “If I *had* to carry a handgun, I’d consider an MT. Problem is, the thing is so weak, you might as well just be throwing the bullets at someone. Likely to hurt them about as much.”

“If you’re a good shot, it doesn’t matter how much stopping power a gun has.”

“If you’re a good shot,” I said solemnly, raising a hand to my

breast, “you’re probably already using a rifle.”

She snorted. “And what handgun *would* you pick, given the choice?”

“Jennings .44.”

“A Spitfire?” she asked, incredulous. “Those things shoot about as accurately as tossing a handful of bullets into a fire.”

“Sure. But if I’m using a handgun, that means someone is in my face. I might not have a chance for a second shot, so I want to down them fast. At that point accuracy doesn’t matter, since they’re so close anyway.”

Megan just rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You’re hopeless. You’re buying into assumptions. You can be just as accurate with a handgun as you can with a rifle, and you can use it at more immediate ranges. In a way, because it’s harder, *truly* skilled people use the handgun. Any slontze can hit with a rifle.”

“You did *not* just say that.”

“I did, and I’m driving, so I get to decide when the argument is over.”

“But … but that makes no sense!”

“It doesn’t need to,” she said. “It’s a brick made out of porridge.”

“You know,” Tia said in our ears, “you two *could* just each carry both a rifle *and* a handgun.”

“That’s not the point,” I said at exactly the same time that Megan said, “You don’t understand.”

“Whatever,” Tia answered. I could hear her sipping cola. “Ten minutes.” Her tone said she was bored with our arguing. She, however, couldn’t see that both of us were grinning.

Sparks, I like this girl, I thought, eyeing Megan. Who seemed to think she’d won the argument.

I tapped the mute-all button on my mobile. “I’m sorry,” I found myself saying.

Megan raised an eyebrow at me.

“For doing what I did to the Reckoners,” I said. “For making everything go a different way than you wanted it to. For dragging you into this.”

She shrugged, then tapped her own mute button. “I’m past it.”

“What changed?”

“Turns out I like you too much to hate you, Knees.” She eyed me. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

I wasn't worried about my head. My heart, on the other hand, was another matter. A wave of shock ran through me. Had she really just said that?

Before I could melt too far, however, my mobile flashed. Prof was trying to contact us. I tapped it with a quick snap.

"Stay sharp, you two," he told us. He sounded a little suspicious. "Keep the lines up."

"Yes sir," I said immediately.

"Eight minutes," Tia said. "The convoy has taken a left on Frewanton. Turn right at the next intersection to continue on an intercept course."

Megan focused on her driving, and so—to keep *me* from focusing too much on *her*—I went over the plan a few times in my head.

We're going to do this one simply, Prof had said. *Nothing fancy at all. Conflux is fragile. He's a schemer, an organizer, a string puller, but he has no powers that will protect him*.

We pull up close to the motorcade, and Abraham uses the dowser to determine if a powerful Epic is really in the car. The van pulls forward in front of the convoy; we throw open the back doors, where Cody stands in costume.

Cody raises his hands; Abraham fires the gauss gun from behind. In the confusion, we'll hope it looks like he launched the bolt from his hand. We hit the entire limo, leave nothing but slag, and then flee. The surviving motorcycle guards can spread the story.

It *would* work. Hopefully. And without Conflux gifting his abilities to high-level Enforcement soldiers, the mechanized armor, the energy weapons, and the copters would all stop working. Fuel cells would run dry, and the city would run out of power.

"We're getting close," Tia said softly in our ears. "The limo is turning right on Beagle. Prof, use the beta formation; I'm pretty sure they're heading uptown, and that means they'll turn onto Finger Street. Megan, you're still on target."

"Got it," Prof said. "I was heading that way."

We passed an abandoned park from the old days. You could tell because of the frozen weeds and fallen branches transformed to steel. Only the dead ones had been changed—Steelheart couldn't affect living matter. In fact, his pulses had trouble with anything too close to a living body. A person's clothing often wouldn't be

transformed, but the ground around them would change.

That kind of oddity was common in Epic powers; it was one of the things that didn't make scientific sense. A dead body and a living one could be very similar, scientifically. But one could be affected by many of the odder Epic powers while the other could not.

My breath fogged the window as we passed the playground, which was no longer safe for play. The weeds were now jagged bits of metal. Steelheart's steel didn't rust, but it could break, leaving sharp edges.

"Okay," Prof said a few minutes later. "I'm here. Climbing up the outside of the building. Megan, I want you to repeat back to me our contingencies."

"Nothing is going to go wrong," Megan said, her voice sounding both beside me and in my ear comm.

"Something always goes wrong," Prof said. I could hear him puffing as he climbed, though he had a gravatonic belt to help him. "Contingencies."

"If you or Tia give the word," Megan said, "we'll pull out and split up. You'll create a distraction. The four of us in the van will break into two squads and go opposite directions, heading for rally point gamma."

"That's what I don't get," I said. "How exactly are we going to go separate directions? We've only got one van."

"Oh, we've got a little surprise back here, lad," Cody said; I'd unmuted him when I'd unmuted Prof and the rest. "I'm actually hoping something goes wrong. I kinda want to use it."

"Never hope for something to go wrong," Tia said.

"But always expect it to," Prof added.

"You're paranoid, old man," Tia said.

"Damn right," Prof said, voice muffled, probably because he was hunkering down with his rocket launcher. I had assumed they'd put Cody in that position with a sniper rifle, but Prof said that he'd rather have something heavier when Enforcement might be involved. Diamond would have been proud.

"You're getting close, Megan," Tia said. "You should be on them in another few minutes. Maintain your speed; the limo is driving faster than it usually does."

"Do they suspect something?" Cody asked.

"They'd be fools not to," Abraham said softly. "Conflux will

take extra care these days, I should think."

"It's worth the risk," Prof said. "Just be careful."

I nodded. With widespread power outages in the city, disabling Enforcement would leave the city in disorder. It would force Steelheart to step forward and take a firm hand to prevent looting or riots. That would mean revealing himself one way or another.

"He's never afraid to fight other Epics," I said.

"What are you talking about?" Prof asked.

"Steelheart. He'll face other Epics, no problem. But he doesn't like putting down riots by himself. He always uses Enforcement. We assumed it's because he doesn't want to bother, but what if it's something more? What if he's afraid of crossfire?"

"Who's that?" Abraham asked.

"No, not an Epic. It just occurred to me—what if Steelheart is afraid of getting hit accidentally? What if that's his weakness? He got hurt by my father, but my father wasn't aiming for him. What if he can only be hurt if the bullet was meant for someone else?"

"Possible," Tia said.

"We need to stay focused," Prof answered. "David, shelve that idea for the moment. We'll come back to it."

He was right. I was letting myself get distracted, like a rabbit doing math problems instead of looking for foxes.

Still … *If I'm right, he wouldn't ever be in danger in a one-on-one fight. He's faced other Epics with impunity. What he seems to be afraid of is a big battle, where bullets are flying around*. There was a sense to it. It was a simple thing, but most Epic weaknesses *were* simple.

"Slow down just a tad," Tia said softly.

Megan complied.

"Here it comes.…"

A sleek black car pulled out onto the dark street in front of us, going the same direction we were. It was flanked by a couple of motorcycles—good security, but not great. We knew from the Reckoners' original plan to hit Conflux that this convoy was probably his. We'd use the dowser to make sure, though.

We continued along behind the limo. I was impressed; even though they didn't know where the limo was going, Tia and Megan had timed it so that the limo came onto *our* street, not the other way around. We'd look far less suspicious this way.

My job was to keep my eyes open and, if things went wrong, to

return fire so Megan could drive. I slipped a small pair of binoculars out of my pocket and hunkered down, sighting through them and inspecting the limo ahead.

"Well?" Prof asked in my ear.

"Looks good," I said.

"I'm going to pull up beside them at the next light," Megan said. "It will feel natural. Be ready, Abraham."

I slipped the binoculars into my pocket and tried to look nonchalant. The next light was green when we hit it, so Megan kept trailing the limo at a safe distance. The light after that, however, turned red before the limo reached it.

We pulled up slowly beside the limo, on the left side.

"There's an Epic near us for sure," Abraham said from the back of our van. He whistled softly. "A powerful one. *Very* powerful. The dowser is focusing in. I'll have more in a second."

One of the motorcycle drivers looked us over. He wore an Enforcement helmet and had an SMG strapped to his back. I tried to peer through the windows of the limo and catch a glimpse of Conflux. I'd always wondered what he looked like.

I couldn't see through the tinted rear glass. But as we pulled forward, I caught sight of someone sitting in the passenger seat. A woman who was vaguely familiar. She met my eyes but then looked away.

Business suit, black hair cut short over her ears. She was Nightwielder's assistant, the one who had been with him at Diamond's. She was probably a liaison to Enforcement; it made sense for her to be in the limo.

Something still made me suspicious. She'd met my eyes; she should have recognized me. Maybe … she *had* recognized me, but hadn't been surprised to see me.

We pulled forward, the light green, and I felt a spike of alarm.

"Prof, I think it's a trap."

At that moment Nightwielder himself flew through the top of the limo, his arms spread wide, lines of darkness stretching from his fingers out into the night.

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MOST people have never seen a High Epic in their glory. That's what we call it when they summon their powers in earnest—when they rise up in their might, their emotions kindled to wrath and fury.

There is a *glow* about them. The air grows sharp, like it's become full of electricity. Heartbeats still. The wind holds its breath. Nightwielder's rising made this the third time I'd seen something like it.

He was clothed in night, and blackness writhed and twisted about him. His face was pale, translucent, but his eyes were alight, his lips drawn in a sneer of hatred. It was the sneer of a god, barely tolerant of even his allies. He had come to destroy.

Looking upon him, I found myself terrified.

"Calamity!" Megan cursed, slamming her foot down on the gas and swerving the van to the side as shadows leaped from around Nightwielder toward us. They moved like ghostly fingers.

"Abort!" Tia called. "Get out of there!"

There was no time. Nightwielder moved in the air, ignoring things like wind and gravity. He flew like a specter out in front of his car and toward us. He wasn't the true danger, though—the true danger was those tendrils of blackness. The van could not avoid them; there were dozens.

Shoving aside my fear, I raised my rifle. The van rattled and jolted around me. Wisps of darkness moved up, wrapping around the vehicle.

Idiot, I thought. I dropped my rifle and shoved my hand into my coat pocket. The flashlight! Panicked, I flipped it on and

shined it right in Nightwielder's face as he floated up beside my window. He was flying face-first, like he was swimming in the air.

The reaction was immediate. Though the flashlight gave off little light that I could see, Nightwielder's face immediately lost its incorporeity. His eyes stopped glowing, and the shadows vanished from around his head. The beam of invisible light pierced the dark tendrils like a laser through a pile of sheep.

In that UV light, Nightwielder's face didn't look divine. It looked frail, human, and very, very surprised. I struggled to get my gun up to fire at him, but the rifle was too unwieldy and my father's handgun was strapped under my arm where I couldn't get at it while holding the flashlight.

Nightwielder looked at me for the space of a single heartbeat, his eyes wide with terror. Then he fled in a blink, streaking sideways away from the van. I wasn't sure, but it seemed like he'd been losing altitude as I shined the light on him, as if all his powers were weakening.

He vanished down a side street, and the shadows that had been moving around the van retreated with him. I had a feeling he wasn't going to be back anytime soon, not after the scare I'd just given him.

Submachine-gun fire erupted around us, bullets pelting the side of the van with metallic *ping*s. I cursed, ducking down as my window shattered. The motorcyclists had opened fire. Though I was crouched low, I could still see a terrible sight: a sleek black Enforcement copter was rising from behind the commercial buildings in front of us.

"Calamity, Tia!" Megan screamed, twisting the wheel. "How did you miss *that*?"

"I don't know," Tia said. "I—"

A ball of light propelled by a long smoke trail snaked through the sky, exploding into the side of the copter. It tipped in the air, flames chewing its side, bits of debris fluttering through the sky.

Rotors slowing, it began to fall.

Rocket launcher, I realized. *Prof*.

"Don't panic." Prof's voice was steady. "We can survive this. Cody, Abraham, prep for the split."

"Prof!" Abraham said. "I think you—"

"Four more copters coming!" Tia cut in. "It looks like they had

them hidden in warehouses all along the limo's route. They didn't know where we'd hit them; that one was just the closest. I … Megan, what are you *doing*?"

The copter was out of control. Smoke billowing from one side, it was spinning in a crooked circle and coming down toward the roadway right in front of us. Megan wasn't turning; she'd punched up the speed, leaning over the wheel and driving the van forward in a frenzied, insane rush right toward where the copter would hit.

I tensed, pushing myself back in my seat and grabbing the side of my door in a panic. She'd lost her mind!

There was no time to object. Bullets pelting us, streets outside a blur, Megan drove the van right under the copter as it crashed to the street with force enough to make the earth beneath us tremble.

Something clipped the top of the van with a ghastly screech of metal on metal, and we spun out to the side, hitting the wall of a brick building and grinding my side of the van along it. Noise, chaos, sparks. My door ripped free. Bricks ground against steel mere inches from me. It seemed to last forever.

Then, a second later, the van lurched to a halt. Trembling, I took a deep breath. I was covered in pebbles of safety glass; the windshield had shattered.

Megan sat breathing hard in the driver's seat—a mad grin on her face, eyes wide. She looked at me.

"Calamity!" I said, looking in Megan's side mirror back at the burning copter. It had hit the roadway right after we passed under it, blocking off the bikers and the pursuit. "Calamity, Megan! *That was awesome!*"

Megan's grin broadened. "You two okay back there?" she called, looking through the little window into the back of the van.

"I feel like I've been in a centrifuge," Cody complained, groaning. "I think the Scotsman drained to my feet and the American floated up to my ears."

"Prof," Abraham said. "I still had the dowser on as Nightwielder fled, and it was focusing on Epic locations. I got confusing readings, but there is *another Epic* in that limo. Maybe a third. That doesn't make sense.…"

"No, it does," Megan said, hurriedly pushing open her door and hopping out onto the street. "They really *were* transporting

Conflux; they didn't know if we'd strike. They just wanted to be ready if we did. He was in that car. That's what you're sensing, Abraham. Probably a third, lesser Epic as another safety measure."

I hastily reached to undo my seat belt, then realized the right half had been ripped free as we skidded against the wall. I shivered, then scrambled out of the van through Megan's side.

"Hurry up, you four," Prof said. I heard an engine revving on his side of the link. "Those other copters are almost upon you, and those cycles will circle around."

"I'm watching them," Tia said. "You've got maybe a minute."

"Where's Nightwielder?" Prof asked.

"David scared him off with a flashlight," Megan said, reaching the back of the van and pulling the doors open.

"Nice work," Prof said.

I grinned in satisfaction as I reached the back of the van. I was just in time to see Cody and Abraham push the back off a huge crate inside. I hadn't seen them load up the van—that had happened in the hangar.

Cody was wearing a dark green jacket and glasses, the uniform we'd devised for Limelight. My eyes were drawn to the items in the crate: three shiny green motorcycles.

"The cycles from Diamond's shop!" I exclaimed, pointing. "You *did* buy them!"

"Sure did," Abraham said, running his hand along the sleek, dark green finish on one of the cycles. "Wasn't about to let machines like *this* pass us by."

"But … you told me no!"

Abraham laughed. "I've heard how you drive, David." He pushed a ramp out from the back of the van and rolled one of the bikes down to Megan. She climbed on, starting it up. Small ovals mounted to the sides of the cycles glowed a bright green. I'd noticed those at Diamond's.

Gravatonics, I thought. *To make the cycles lighter, maybe?* Gravatonics couldn't make things fly; they were just used to reduce recoil or to make heavy items easier to move.

Abraham rolled the next vehicle down.

"You *were* going to get to drive one, David," Cody said, quickly gathering things out of the back of the van, including the dowser. "But somebody wrecked the van."

“It would never stay ahead of the copters anyway,” Megan said. “Two of us will have to ride tandem.”

“I’ll take David on mine,” Cody said. “Grab that pack, lad. Where are the helmets?”

“Hurry!” Tia exclaimed, her voice urgent.

I jumped to grab the pack Cody pointed out. It was heavy. “I can drive!” I said.

Megan glanced at me as she pulled on her helmet. “You took out two signs trying to drive around *one* corner.”

“Small ones!” I said, slinging on the pack and dashing toward Cody’s cycle. “And I was under a lot of pressure!”

“Really?” Megan said. “Kind of like we are now?”

I hesitated. *Wow. I walked into that one, didn’t I?*

Cody and Abraham started up their cycles. There were only three helmets. I didn’t ask for one—hopefully my Reckoner jacket would be enough.

Before I could reach Cody, I heard the thumping sounds of a copter overhead. An Enforcement armored van appeared out of a side street, a man in the machine-gun turret on the top. He opened fire.

“Calamity!” Cody said, kicking his cycle forward with a burst of speed as the bullets hit the ground near him. I fell back beside the wreckage of our van.

“Get on,” Megan yelled to me; she was closest. “Now!”

I ducked down and ran to her cycle, throwing myself up behind her and grabbing her waist as she revved the engine. We lurched away, zipping down an alleyway as Enforcement cycles came roaring out of another side street.

We lost Cody and Abraham in a flash. I held tight to Megan—something I’ll admit I wished I could have done under less insane circumstances. Cody’s bag thumped against my back.

I left my rifle in the van, I realized with a sinking feeling. I hadn’t noticed in the panic to grab Cody’s bag and get to a cycle.

I felt terrible, like I’d abandoned a friend.

We burst out of the alleyway and Megan turned onto a dark city street, increasing our speed to what I felt was a pretty ridiculous level. The wind blew against my face so powerfully, I had to squeeze in close and low against her back.

“Where are we going?” I yelled.

Fortunately we still had our mobiles and our earpieces. Though

I couldn't hear her naturally, her voice spoke in my ear. "There's a plan! We all go different ways and meet up!"

"Except you're going the wrong way," Tia said, sounding exasperated. "And so is Abraham!"

"Where is the limo?" Abraham asked; even with his voice in my ear, it was hard to hear him over the wind.

"Forget the limo," Prof ordered.

"I can still get to Conflux," Abraham said.

"It doesn't matter," Prof said.

"But—"

"It's over," Prof said, voice harsh. "We ran."

We ran.

Megan hit a bump and I jolted, but hung on tight. My mind reeled as I realized what Prof meant. An Epic who truly sought to defeat Steelheart wouldn't have run from Enforcement; he'd have been able to handle a few squads of them on his own.

By fleeing, we proved what we really were. Steelheart would never face us in person now.

"Then I want to do something," Abraham said, "make him hurt before we abandon the city. Half of Enforcement is going to be out chasing us. That limo is unguarded, and I've got some grenades."

"Jon, let him try," Tia said. "This is already a disaster. At least we can make it cost Steelheart."

Streetlights were a blur. I could hear cycles behind us, and I risked glancing over my shoulder. *Calamity!* I thought. They were close, their headlights illuminating the street.

"You'll never make it," Prof said to Abraham. "Enforcement is on you."

"We'll draw them off him," I said.

"Wait," Megan said. "We'll *what?*"

"Thanks," Abraham said. "Meet up with me at Fourth and Nodell; see if you can take the pressure away from me."

Megan tried to twist around and glare at me through her helmet's visor.

"Keep driving!" I said urgently.

"Slontze," she said, then took the next turn. *Without slowing down.*

I screamed, certain we were dead. The bike went almost parallel to the ground, skidding against the street, but the

gravatonics on the side glowed brightly, keeping us from toppling. We half skidded, half drove around the corner, almost like we were tethered to it.

We came upright, my scream dying off.

There was an explosion from behind us and the steel street trembled. I looked over my shoulder, hair whipping in the wind. One of the black Enforcement cycles had just failed to take the corner at speed, and was now a smoking wreck pasted to the side of a steel building. Their gravatonics didn't seem as good as ours, if they even had any.

"How many are there?" Megan asked.

"Three now. No, wait, there are two more. *Five*. Sparks!"

"Great," Megan muttered. "How exactly do you expect us to take heat off Abraham?"

"I don't know. Improvise!"

"They're setting up roadblocks on nearby streets," Tia warned in our ears. "Jon, copter on Seventeenth."

"On my way."

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Trying to keep you kids alive," Prof said.

"Sparks," Cody cursed. "Roadblock on Eighth. Taking an alleyway over to Marston."

"No," Tia said. "They're trying to get you to go that way. Circle back around. You can escape into the understreets on Moulton."

"Right," Cody said.

Megan and I burst out onto a large roadway, and a second later Abraham's cycle came skidding out of a side street in front of us, almost level to the ground, the gravatonics keeping it from tipping over completely. It was impressive; the bike turned almost on its side, wheels spinning, sparks spraying out from underneath it. The gravatonic mechanisms cushioned the momentum so the wheels could grip the road and the cycle could turn, but only after an extended skid.

I'll bet I could drive one of these things, I told myself. *It doesn't look too hard*. Like slipping on a banana peel around a corner at eighty miles an hour. Piece of cake.

I glanced over my shoulder. There were at least a dozen black cycles behind us now, though we were going too fast for them to dare shooting at us. Everyone needed to concentrate on their driving. That was probably the idea behind going so fast in the

first place.

"Armored unit!" Tia exclaimed. "Just ahead!"

We barely had time to react as a juggernaut of an armor unit, on two legs and standing fifteen feet high, lumbered out onto the street and opened fire with both rotary guns. Bullets hit the steel building wall beside us, creating a spray of sparks. I kept my head down and my jaw clenched as Megan kicked a lever on the cycle and sent us down in a long gravatonic skid, almost parallel to the ground, to pass under the bullets.

Wind ripped at my jacket, sparks blinded my vision. I could barely make out two enormous feet of steel on either side as we slid between the armor's legs. Megan brought the cycle up in a wide spin as we turned a corner. Abraham got around the armor to one side, but his cycle was trailing smoke.

"I'm hit," Abraham said.

"Are you all right?" Tia asked, alarmed.

"Jacket kept me in one piece," Abraham said with a grunt.

"Megan," I said softly. "He doesn't look good." Abraham was slowing, one hand holding his side.

She glanced at him, then turned quickly back to the road. "Abraham, as we take the next curve, I want you to break right into the first alleyway. They're far enough behind that they might not see. I'll keep straight and draw them after."

"They'll wonder where I went," Abraham said. "It—"

"Do it!" Megan said sharply.

He didn't object further. We took the next corner but had to slow down to keep from outpacing Abraham. I could see he was trailing blood, his cycle riddled with bullet holes. It was a wonder it was still moving.

As we came around, Abraham turned and darted right. Megan punched her cycle and the wind rose to a howl as we raced down a dark street. I risked a glance behind me and almost lost Cody's pack as it slipped down my shoulder. I had to release Megan for a moment with one hand and hold it, which threw me off balance and nearly sent me tumbling to the ground.

"Be careful," Megan said with a curse.

"Right," I said, confused. In that jumbled moment, I *thought* I'd seen another green cycle like our own, following us close behind.

I looked again. The Enforcement cycles seemed to have taken the bait and were following us and not Abraham. Their headlights

were a wave of light on the street, helmets reflecting streetlights. Of the phantom cycle I'd thought I'd seen, there was no sign.

"Sparks," Tia said. "Megan, they've got blockades going up all around you, particularly in places that lead to the understreets. They seem to have guessed that's where we're trying to run."

In the distance I saw the flash of an explosion in the sky, and another copter began trailing smoke. There was yet another heading our way, however—a black form with blinking lights against the dark sky.

Megan sped up.

"Megan?" Tia said, her voice laced with urgency. *"You're heading straight for a blockade."*

Megan gave no response. I could feel her body growing more and more rigid in my grip. She leaned forward, and intensity seemed to *stream* off her.

"Megan!" I said, noticing the lights flashing ahead as Enforcement set up their blockade. Cars, vans, trucks. A dozen or more soldiers, a mechanized unit.

"MEGAN!" I screamed.

She seemed to shake for a moment, then cursed and punched us to the side as gunfire pelted the street around us. We tore down an alleyway, the wall an inch from my elbow, then hit the next street and went down in a long turn, throwing sparks as we took the corner.

"I'm out," Abraham said softly, grunting. "Abandoning the cycle. I can make it to one of the bolt-holes. They didn't spot me, but some soldiers came down and started setting up in the stairway after I passed."

"Sparks," Cody murmured. "Are you monitoring the Enforcement audio lines, Tia?"

"Yeah," Tia said. "They're confused. They think this is a full-out assault on the city. Prof keeps blasting copters out of the air, and we all went different directions. Enforcement seems to think they're fighting dozens, maybe hundreds of insurgents."

"Good," Prof said. "Cody, are you clear?"

"I'm still dodging a few cycles," he said. "I've ended up looping around." He hesitated. "Tia, where's the limo? Is it still out?"

"It's breaking for Steelheart's palace," she said.

"I'm heading along that way too," Cody said. "What street?"

"Cody …," Prof said.

Gunfire from behind distracted me from the rest of the conversation. I caught a glimpse of cycles, their drivers holding out SMGs and firing. We were going more slowly now; Megan had driven us into a slum neighborhood where the streets were smaller, and she was weaving us through lots of twists and turns.

"Megan, that's dangerous," Tia said. "There are a lot of dead ends in there."

"The other way is all dead ends," Megan answered. She seemed to have recovered from whatever lapse had almost led her to drive us right into a blockade.

"I'm going to have trouble leading you," Tia said. "Try to take the next right."

Megan started to break that direction, but an approaching cycle moved to cut us off, the soldier firing an SMG one-handed toward us in a spray. Megan cursed and slowed, sending the soldier on ahead, then she broke left down an alleyway. We nearly slammed into a large garbage bin, but she managed to weave around it. I guessed that we were barely going twenty.

Barely going twenty, I thought. Twenty mph down narrow alleys while being shot at. It was still insane, just a different kind of insane.

I could hold on pretty well with one arm at these speeds, Cody's pack thumping against my back. I probably should have dropped that by now. I didn't even know what was …

I felt at the pack, realizing something. I carefully slung it down in front of me, between Megan and myself. I gripped the cycle between my knees, let go of Megan, and unzipped the pack.

The gauss gun lay inside. Shaped like a regular assault rifle, perhaps a little longer, it had one of the power cells we'd recovered hooked up at the side. I pulled it out. With the power cell it was heavy, but I could still maneuver it.

"Megan!" Tia said. "Blockade ahead."

We turned into another alley, and I nearly lost the gun as I grabbed onto Megan with one arm.

"No!" Tia said. "Not right. That's—"

A motorcycle followed us into the alleyway. Bullets hit the wall just above my head. And right in front of us the alley ended in a wall. Megan tried to brake.

I didn't think. I grabbed the gun with both hands, leaned back, and raised the barrel right over Megan's shoulder.

Then I fired at the wall.

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THE wall before us went up in a flash of green energy. Megan tried to turn the cycle and stop. We skidded through the churning green smoke, pebbles scattering under our tires, and slid out onto the street on the other side, where we came to a halt. Megan's body was braced for impact. She seemed stunned.

The Enforcement cyclist burst from the smoke. I swung the gauss gun and blasted his cycle out from underneath him. The shot turned the whole motorcycle into a flash of green energy, vaporizing it and part of the officer on it. His body went rolling.

The gun was amazing—there was no recoil, and the shots *vaporized* instead of really *exploding*. That left little debris, but gave a great light show and a lot of smoke.

Megan turned toward me, a grin splitting her lips. "About time you started doing something useful back there."

"Go," I said. The sound of more cycles was coming from the alley way.

Megan revved our motorcycle, then led us in a darting, stomach-churning pattern through the narrow streets of the slum. I couldn't turn to fire the gun behind us as we drove, so instead I clung to her waist with one hand and settled the gun on her shoulder to steady it, using the iron sights, scope folded down to the side.

We roared out of an alleyway and skidded toward a blockade. I blasted a hole through a truck for us, then for good measure hit the armored unit with a shot to the leg. Soldiers scattered, yelling, some trying to fire as we sped through the opening I'd made. The armor unit collapsed and Megan dodged to the side,

down a dark alley. Shouts and curses sounded behind as some of the cycles chasing us got caught up in the confusion.

"Nice work," Tia said in our ears, her voice calm again. "I think I can get you to the understreets. There's an old tunnel up ahead at the bottom of a flood gulley. You might have to blast your way through some walls, though."

"I think I can hit a wall or two," I said. "So long as they aren't good at dodging."

"Be careful," Prof said. "That gun drinks energy like Tia with a six-pack of cola. That power cell could run a small city, but it will give you only a dozen shots at best. Abraham, you still with us?"

"I'm here."

"You in the bolt-hole?"

"Yes. Bandaging my wound. It's not too bad."

"I'll be the judge of that. I'm almost to you. Cody, status?"

"I can see the limo," Cody said in my ear as Megan took another corner. "I've mostly shaken pursuit. I've got a tensor; I'll hit the limo with a grenade, then use the tensor to drill myself down to the understreets."

"Not an option," Prof said. "It'll take you too long to drill down that far."

"Wall!" Tia said.

"Got it," I said, blasting a hole through a wall at the end of an alleyway. We roared out into a backyard, and I blasted a hole in another wall, letting us cut into the next yard. Megan turned us to the right, then drove us through a very narrow slot between two houses.

"Go left," Tia said as we reached the street.

"Prof," Cody said. "I can *see* the limo. I can hit it."

"Cody, I don't—"

"I'm taking the shot, Prof," Cody said. "Abraham's right. Steelheart's going to come for us after this. We need to hurt him as much as we can, while we can."

"All right."

"Turn right," Tia said.

We turned.

"I'm sending you through a large building," Tia said. "Can you handle that?"

Gunfire sprayed against the wall beside us, and Megan cursed, hunkering down farther. I held the gauss gun in a sweaty grip,

feeling terribly exposed with my back to the enemy. I could hear the cycles back there.

"They *really* seem to want you two," Tia said softly. "They're pulling a lot of resources toward you, and … Calamity!"

"What?" I said.

"My video feed just went out," Tia said. "Something's wrong. Cody?"

"Little busy," he grunted.

More gunfire sounded from behind. Something hit the cycle, jarring us, and Megan cursed.

"The building, Tia!" I said. "How do we find that building? We'll lose them inside."

"Second right," Tia told us. "Then straight to the end of the road. It's an old mall, and the gulley is just behind it. I was looking for other routes, but—"

"This will work," Megan said curtly. "David, be ready to open the place up for us."

"Got it," I said, steadying the gun, though it was harder now that she'd picked up speed. We took a corner, then turned toward a large, flat structure at the end of the road. I vaguely remembered malls from the days before Calamity. They'd been marketplaces, all enclosed.

Megan was driving fast and heading right at it. I took aim carefully and blasted through a set of steel doors in the front. We shot through the smoke, entering the heavy blackness of an abandoned building. The headlight of the cycle showed shops on either side of us.

The place had been looted long ago, though a lot of wares remained in the shops. Clothing that had been turned to steel wasn't particularly useful.

Megan wove easily through the mall's open corridors, taking us up a frozen escalator onto the second floor. Engines echoed throughout the building as Enforcement cycles followed us in.

Tia couldn't guide us any longer, it appeared, but Megan seemed to have an idea of what she was doing. From the balcony above, I got a shot at the cycles following us. I hit the ground in front of them, taking a chunk out of the floor and causing several to skid out, the others scattering for cover. None seemed to have drivers as skilled as Megan.

"Wall up ahead," Megan said.

I blasted it, then glanced at the energy meter on the side of the gauss gun. Prof was right; I'd drained it pretty quickly. We had maybe a couple of shots left.

We roared out into open air and the gravatonics on the cycle engaged, softening our landing as we fell one story to the street below. We still hit hard; the cycle wasn't intended to take jumps that high. I grunted, my backside and legs hammered from the impact. Megan immediately punched the vehicle forward down a narrow alleyway behind the mall.

I could see the ground fall away up ahead. The gulley. We only had to—

A sleek black copter rose out of the gulley in front of us, and the rotary guns on its sides began to spin up.

Not a chance, I thought, raising the gauss gun with both hands, sighting. Megan ducked lower and the cycle hit the edge of the gulley. The copter started firing. I could see the pilot's helmet through the glass of the cockpit.

I took the shot.

I'd often dreamed of doing incredible things. I'd imagined what it would be like to work with the Reckoners, to fight the Epics, to actually *do* things instead of sitting around thinking about them. With that shot, I finally got my chance.

I hung in the air, staring down a hundred-ton death machine, and squeezed the trigger. I popped the copter's canopy dead on, vaporizing it and the pilot inside. For a moment I felt like the Epics must. Like a god.

And then I fell out of the seat.

I should have expected it—going into free fall in a twenty-foot ravine with two hands on my gun and none on my ride made it kind of inevitable. I won't say I was happy to find myself plummeting toward broken legs and probably worse.

But that shot … That shot had been worth it.

I didn't feel much of the fall. It happened so fast. I hit mere moments after realizing I'd lost my seat, and I heard a crunch. That was followed by a *boom* that deafened me, and that was followed by a wave of heat.

I lay there, stunned, as my vision swam. I found myself facing the wreckage of the copter, which burned nearby. I felt numb.

Suddenly Megan was shaking me. I coughed, rolling over, and looked up at her. She'd pulled off her helmet, so I could see her

face. Her beautiful face. She actually seemed concerned about me. That made me smile.

She was saying something. My ears rang, and I squinted, trying to read her lips. I could barely hear the words. "… up, you slontze! Get up!"

"You aren't supposed to shake someone who's suffered a fall," I mumbled. "Might have a broken back."

"You'll have a broken head if you don't *start moving*."

"But—"

"Idiot. Your jacket absorbed the blow. Remember? The one you wear to keep you from getting killed? They're supposed to make up for you doing stupid things like letting go of me in midair."

"It's not my intention to let go of you," I mumbled. "Not ever."

She froze.

Wait. Had I just said that out loud?

Jacket, I thought, wiggling my toes, then raising both arms. *The jacket's shielding device protected me. And … and we're still being chased.*

Calamity! I *was* a slontze. I rolled onto my knees and let Megan help me to my feet. I coughed a few times but felt more stable by the moment. I let go of her and was pretty steady by the time we reached the cycle, which she'd landed without crashing.

"Wait," I said, looking around. "Where is …"

The gauss gun lay in several pieces where it had fallen and hit a steel rock. I felt a sinking feeling, though I knew the gun wasn't nearly as useful to us now. We couldn't use it to pretend to be an Epic any longer, not now that Enforcement had seen me shooting it.

Still, it was a pity to lose such a nice weapon. Particularly after leaving my own rifle in the van. I was making a real habit of that sort of thing.

I climbed onto the cycle behind Megan, who pulled on her helmet again. The poor machine was looking pretty ragged, scratched and dented, the windshield cracked. One of the gravatonics—a palm-size oval on the right side—didn't light up like the others anymore. But the cycle still started, and the engine roared as Megan drove us down the ravine toward a large tunnel up ahead. It looked like it led into the sewage system, but a lot of things like that were misleading in Newcago, what with the Great Transfersion and the creation of the understreets.

“Hey, all y’all?” Cody said softly in our ears. By some miracle I’d kept my mobile and earpiece through the fall. “Something strange is going on. Something very, very strange is going on.”

“Cody,” Tia said. “Where are you?”

“Limo’s down,” he said. “I shot out one of the tires and it drove itself into a wall. I had to eliminate six soldiers before I could approach.”

Megan and I passed into the tunnel, the darkness deepening. The ground sloped downward. I was vaguely familiar with the area, and I figured this would lead us into the understreets near Gibbons Street, a relatively unpopulated area.

“What about Conflux?” Prof asked Cody.

“He wasn’t inside the limo.”

“Maybe one of the Enforcement officers you shot was actually Conflux,” Tia said.

“Nah,” Cody said. “I found him. In the trunk.”

The line was quiet for a moment.

“You’re sure it’s him?” Prof asked.

“Well, no,” Cody said. “Maybe they had some *other* Epic tied up in their trunk. Either way, the dowser says this lad’s *very* powerful. But he’s unconscious.”

“Shoot him,” Prof said.

“No,” Megan said. “Bring him.”

“I think she’s right, Prof,” Cody said. “If he’s tied up, he can’t be that strong. Either that, or they’ve used his weakness to make him impotent.”

“We don’t know his weakness, though,” Prof said. “Put him out of his misery.”

“I’m not shooting an unconscious fellow, Prof,” Cody said. “Not even an Epic.”

“Then leave him.”

I was torn. Epics deserved to die. All of them. But why was he unconscious—what were they doing with him? Was it even Conflux?

“Jon,” Tia said. “We might need this. If it *is* Conflux, he could tell us things. We might even be able to use him against Steelheart, or bargain for our escape.”

“He’s not supposed to be very dangerous,” I admitted, speaking into the line. My lip was bleeding. I’d bit it when I’d fallen, and now that I was a little more aware of things I realized my leg was

aching and my side was *throbbing*. The jackets helped, but they were far from perfect.

"Fine," Prof said. "Bolt-hole seven, Cody. Don't take him to the base. Leave him tied up, blindfolded, and gagged. Do *not* talk to him. We need to deal with him together."

"Right," Cody said. "I'm on it."

"Megan and David," Prof said, "I want you to—"

I lost the rest as gunfire erupted around us. The cycle—battered as it was—spun out and went down.

Right onto the side where the gravatonics were broken.

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WITHOUT the gravatonics, the cycle reacted like any normal motorcycle would when falling onto its side at very high speed.

Which isn't a good thing.

I was immediately ripped free, the cycle skidding out from underneath me as my leg hit the ground and the friction pulled me backward. Megan wasn't so lucky. She got pinned under the cycle, its weight grinding her against the ground. It collided with the wall of the tubular steel corridor.

The tunnel wavered, and my leg burned with pain. As I rolled to a halt and things stopped shaking, I realized that I was still alive. I actually found that surprising.

Behind us, from an alcove we had driven past, two men in full Enforcement armor stepped out of the shadows. There were some small, faint lights ringing the edge of the alcove. By that light I could see that the soldiers looked relaxed. I swore I could hear one chuckling inside his helmet as he said something over the comm unit to his companion. They assumed Megan and I would both be dead—or at least knocked out of fighting shape—by such a crash.

To Calamity with that, I thought, cheeks hot with anger. Before I'd had time to think, I'd unholstered the pistol under my arm—the pistol that had killed my father—and unloaded four shots at nearly point-blank range into the men. I didn't aim for their chests, not with their armor. The sweet spot was the neck.

Both men fell. I breathed in a deep, ragged breath, my hand and gun shaking in front of me. I blinked a few times, shocked that I'd managed to hit them. Maybe Megan was right about

handguns.

I groaned, then managed to sit up. My Reckoner jacket was in tatters; many of the diodes along its inside—the ones that generated the protective field—were smoking or entirely ripped free. My leg was scraped badly along one side. Though it hurt fiercely, the lacerations weren't too deep. I was able to stumble to my feet and walk. Kind of.

The pain was … rather unpleasant.

Megan! The thought came through the daze, and—stupid though it was—I didn't check to see if the two soldiers were actually dead. I limped over to where the fallen cycle had skidded up against the wall. The only light here was from my mobile. I pushed aside the wreckage and found Megan sprawled beneath, her jacket in even worse shape than mine.

She didn't look good. She wasn't moving, her eyes were closed, and her helmet was cracked, only halfway on. Blood trailed down her cheek. It was the color of her lips. Her arm was twisted at an awkward angle, and her entire side—leg up to torso—was bloodied. I knelt, aghast, the cool, calm light of my mobile revealing horrible wounds everywhere I turned it.

"David?" Tia's voice came softly from my mobile, which hung in its place from my jacket. It was a miracle it still functioned, though I'd lost my earpiece. "David? I can't reach Megan. What's going on?"

"Megan's down," I said numbly. "Her mobile is gone. Shattered, probably." It had been attached to her jacket, which was mostly gone also.

Breathing. I have to see if she's breathing. I leaned down, trying to use my mobile screen to catch her breath. Then I thought to check for a pulse. *I'm in shock. I'm not thinking right*. Could you think that, when you weren't thinking right?

I pressed my fingers against Megan's neck. The skin felt clammy.

"David!" Tia said urgently. "David, there's chatter on the Enforcement channels. They know where you are. There are multiple units converging on you. Infantry and armor. Go!"

I felt a pulse. Shallow, light, but there.

"She's alive," I said. "Tia, she's alive!"

"You *have* to get out of there, David!"

Moving Megan could make things worse for her, but leaving

her would definitely make things worse. If they took her she'd be tortured and executed. I pulled off my tattered jacket and used it to wrap my leg. As I worked I felt something in the pocket. I pulled it out. The pen detonator and blasting caps.

In a moment of lucidity I stuck one of the blasting caps on the cycle's fuel cell. I'd heard you could destabilize and blow those, if you knew what you were doing—which I didn't. It seemed like a good idea, though. My *only* idea. I took my mobile and attached it to my wrist mount. Then, sucking in a deep breath, I shoved aside the broken motorcycle—the front wheel had been ripped clean off—and lifted Megan.

Her broken helmet slipped free, falling off and cracking against the ground. That made her hair cascade down over my shoulder. She was heavier than she looked. People always are. Though she was small, she was compact, *dense*. I decided she'd probably not like hearing me describe her that way.

I got her up over my shoulders, then began an unsteady hike down the tunnel. Tiny yellow lights hung from the ceiling periodically, giving barely enough light to see by, even for an understreeter like me.

Soon my shoulders and back were complaining. I kept on going, one foot after another. I wasn't moving very quickly. I wasn't thinking very well either.

"David." Prof's voice. Quiet, intense.

"I'm *not* leaving her," I said through clenched teeth.

"I wouldn't have you do something like that," Prof said. "I'd much sooner have you stand your ground and make Enforcement gun you both down."

Not very comforting.

"It's not going to come to that, son," Prof said. "Help is on its way."

"I think I can hear them," I said. I'd finally reached the end of the tunnel; it opened onto a narrow crossroads in the understreets. There were no buildings here, just steel corridors. I didn't know this part of town well.

The ceiling was solid, with no gaps up to the air above like there were in the area where I'd grown up. Those were definitely shouts I heard echoing from the right. I heard *clanks* from behind, steel feet pounding against the steel ground. More shouts. They'd found the cycle.

I leaned up against the wall, shifting Megan's weight, then pressed the button on my pen detonator. I was relieved to hear a *pop* from behind as the cycle's fuel cell blew. The shouts rose. Maybe I'd caught a few of them in the blast; if I was really lucky they'd assume I was hiding somewhere near the wreckage and had tossed a grenade or something.

I hefted Megan, then took the left turn at the crossroads. Her blood had soaked my clothing. She was probably dead by—

No. I wouldn't think about that. One foot in front of the other. Help was coming. Prof *promised* help was coming. It would come. Prof didn't lie. Jonathan Phaedrus, founder of the Reckoners, a man I somehow understood. If there was anything in this world I felt I could trust, it was him.

I walked a good five minutes before I was forced to pull up short. The tunnel in front of me ended in a flat wall of steel. Dead end. I glanced over my shoulder to see flashlights and shadows moving. No escape that way.

The corridor around me was wide, maybe twenty paces across, and tall. There was some old construction equipment on the ground, though most of it looked to have been picked over by opportunists. There were a few heaps of broken bricks and cinder blocks. Someone had been building more rooms down here recently. Well, those might provide some cover.

I stumbled over and laid Megan down behind the largest of the piles, then I flipped my mobile to manual response. Prof and the others wouldn't be able to hear me unless I touched the screen to broadcast, but it also meant they wouldn't give away my position by trying to contact me.

I crouched down behind the bricks. The pile didn't give me complete cover, but it was better than nothing. Cornered, outgunned, with no way to …

Suddenly I felt like an idiot. I dug in the zip pocket on my trouser leg, fishing for my tensor. I pulled it out triumphantly. Maybe I could dig down to the steel catacombs, or even just dig out to the side and find a safer path.

I pulled on the glove, and only then did I realize that the tensor had been shredded. I stared at it with a sinking despair. It had been in the pocket on the leg I'd landed on when falling, and the pouch had been ripped at the bottom. The tensor was missing two fingers, and the electronics had been shattered, pieces hanging off

like eyes drooping out of a zombie's sockets in an old horror movie.

I almost laughed as I settled back down. The Enforcement soldiers were searching the corridors. Shouts. Footsteps. Flashlights. Getting closer.

My mobile blinked softly. I turned the volume way down, then pressed the screen and leaned in. "David?" Tia asked in a very quiet voice. "David, where are you?"

"I reached the bottom of the tunnel," I whispered back, holding the mobile up to my mouth. "I turned left."

"Left? That's a dead end. You need to—"

"I know," I said. "There were soldiers the other directions." I glanced at Megan, lying slumped on the floor. I tested her neck again.

Still a pulse. I closed my eyes in relief. *Not that it matters now*.

"Calamity," Tia swore. I heard gunfire and jumped, thinking it was from my position. But it wasn't. It was from the line.

"Tia?" I hissed.

"They're here," she said. "Don't worry about me. I can hold this place. David, you have to—"

"Hey, you!" a voice called from the intersection.

I ducked down, but the mound of bricks wasn't large enough to hide me completely unless I was practically lying flat.

"There's someone over there!" the voice shouted. Powerful, Enforcement-issue flashlights pointed my direction. Most of those would be on the ends of assault rifles.

My mobile flashed. I tapped it. "David." Prof's voice. He sounded winded. "Use the tensor."

"Broken," I whispered. "I ruined it in the crash."

Silence.

"Try it anyway," Prof urged.

"Prof, it's dead." I peeked over the bricks. A large crowd of soldiers was gathering at the other end of the hall. Several were kneeling with guns pointed in my direction, eyes to scopes. I kept low.

"Just do it," Prof ordered.

I sighed, then pressed my hand against the ground. I closed my eyes, but it wasn't easy to concentrate.

"Hold up your arms and walk forward slowly!" a voice shouted down the hall toward me. "If you do not show yourself, we will

be forced to open fire."

I tried as best I could to ignore them. I focused on the tensor, on the vibrations. For a moment I thought I felt something, a low hum—deep, powerful.

It was gone. This was stupid. Like trying to saw a hole in a wall using only a bottle of soda.

"Sorry, Prof," I said. "It's busted up good." I checked the magazine on my father's gun. Five rounds left. Five precious rounds that might be able to hurt Steelheart. I'd never have the chance to find out.

"You are running out of time, friend!" the soldier called toward me.

"You have to hold out," Prof said urgently. His voice sounded frail with the volume down so low.

"You should go to Tia," I said, preparing myself.

"She'll be fine," Prof said. "Abraham is on his way to help her, and the hideout was designed with an attack in mind. She can seal the entrance and wait them out. David, you *must* hang on long enough for me to arrive."

"I'll see that they don't take us alive, Prof," I promised. "The safety of the Reckoners is more important than I am." I fished at Megan's side, getting out her handgun and then flipping off its safety. SIG Sauer P226, .40 caliber. A nice gun.

"I'm coming, son," Prof said softly. *"Hold out."*

I peeked up. The officers were advancing, guns raised. They probably wanted to take me alive. Well, maybe that would let me take a few of them out before I fell.

I lifted Megan's gun and let loose a burst of rapid-fire shots. They had the intended effect; the officers scattered, seeking cover. Some fired back, and chips sprayed across me as bricks exploded to automatic-weapon fire.

Well, so much for hoping they wanted me alive.

I was sweating. "Hell of a way to go, eh?" I found myself saying to Megan as I ducked around and fired on an officer who'd gotten too close. I think one of the bullets actually got through his armor—he was limping as he jumped behind a few rusty barrels.

I hunkered down again, assault-rifle fire sounding like firecrackers in a tin can. Which was, as I thought about it, kind of what this was. *I'm getting better*. I smiled wryly as I dumped the magazine from Megan's gun and locked a new one in.

“I’m sorry to let you down,” I said to her immobile form. Her breathing had grown more shallow. “You deserved to live through this, even if I didn’t.”

I tried to fire off more rounds, but gunfire drove me back to cover before I could get off a single shot. I breathed hard, wiping some blood from my cheek. Some of the exploding rubble had hit hard enough to cut me.

“You know,” I said, “I think I fell for you that first day. Stupid, huh? Love at first sight. What a cliché.” I got off three shots, but the soldiers were acting less scared now. They had figured out there was only one of me, and that my gun was only a handgun. I was probably only alive because I’d blown the cycle, which made them worry about explosives.

“I don’t even know if I can call it love,” I whispered, reloading. “Am I in love? Is it just infatuation? We’ve known each other for less than a month, and you’ve treated me like dirt about half that time. But that day fighting Fortuity and that day in the power plant, it seems like we had something. A … I don’t know. Something together. Something I wanted.”

I glanced at her pale, motionless figure.

“I think,” I said, “that a month ago, I would have left you by the cycle. Because I wanted so badly to get my vengeance on *him*.”

Bam, bam, bam!

The pile of bricks shook, as if the officers were trying to cut through them to get to me.

“That scares me about myself,” I said softly, not looking at Megan. “For what it’s worth, thank you for making me care about something other than Steelheart. I don’t know if I love you. But whatever the emotion is, it’s the strongest one I’ve felt in years. Thank you.” I fired widely but fell back as a bullet grazed my arm.

The magazine was empty. I sighed, dropping Megan’s gun and raising my father’s. Then I pointed it at her.

My finger hesitated on the trigger. It would be a mercy. Better a quick death than to suffer torture and execution. I tried to force myself to pull the trigger.

Sparks, she looks beautiful, I thought. Her unbloodied side was toward me, her golden hair fanning out, her skin pale and eyes closed as if asleep.

Could I really do this?

The gunshots had paused. I risked glancing over my crumbling pile of bricks. Two enormous forms were mechanically clomping down the hallway. So they *had* brought in armor units. A piece of me felt proud that I was such a problem for them. The chaos the Reckoners had caused this day, the destruction we'd brought to Steelheart's minions, had driven them to overkill. A squad of twenty men and two mechanized armors had been sent to take down one guy with a pistol.

"Time to die," I whispered. "I think I'll do it while firing a handgun at a fifteen-foot-tall suit of powered armor. At least it will be dramatic."

I took a deep breath, nearly surrounded by Enforcement forms creeping forward in the dark corridor. I began to stand, my gun leveled at Megan more firmly this time. I'd shoot her, then force the soldiers to gun me down.

I noticed that my mobile was blinking.

"Fire!" a soldier yelled.

The ceiling melted.

I saw it distinctly. I was looking down the tunnel, not wanting to watch Megan as I shot her. I had a clear view of a circle in the ceiling becoming a column of black dust, cascading in a shower of disintegrated steel. Like sand from an enormous spigot, the particles hit the floor and billowed outward in a cloud.

The haze cleared. My finger twitched, but I had not pulled the trigger. A figure stood from a crouch amid the dust; he had fallen from above. He wore a black coat—thin, like a lab coat—dark trousers, black boots, and a small pair of goggles over his eyes.

Prof had come, and he wore a tensor on each hand, the green light glowing with a phantom cast.

The officers opened fire, releasing a storm of bullets down the hallway. Prof raised his hand and thrust forward the glowing tensor. I could almost *feel* the device hum.

Bullets burst in midair, crumbling. They hit Prof as little shavings of fluttering steel, no more dangerous than pinches of dirt. Hundreds of them pelted him and the ground around him; the ones that missed flew apart in the air, catching the light. Suddenly I understood why he wore the goggles.

I stood up, slack jawed, gun forgotten in my fingers. I'd assumed *I* was getting good with my tensor, but destroying those

bullets … that was beyond anything I'd been able to comprehend.

Prof didn't give the baffled soldiers time to recover. He carried no weapon that I could see, but he leaped free of the dust and dashed right toward them. The mechanized units started firing, but they used their rotary guns—as if they couldn't believe what they'd seen and figured a higher caliber was the answer.

More bullets popped in the air, shattered by Prof's tensors. His feet skidded across the ground on the dust, and then he reached the Enforcement troops.

He attacked fully armored men with his fists.

My eyes widened as I saw him drop a soldier with a fist to the face, the man's helmet melting to powder before his attack. *He's vaporizing the armor as he attacks*. Prof spun between two soldiers, moving gracefully, slamming a fist into the gut of one, then spinning and slamming an arm into the leg of the other. Dust sprayed out as their armor failed them, disintegrating just before Prof hit.

As he came up from the spin he pounded a hand against the side of the steel chamber. The pulverized metal poured away, and something long and thin fell from the wall into his hand. A sword, carved from the steel by an incredibly precise tensor blast.

Steel flashed as Prof struck at the disordered officers. Some tried to keep firing, and others were going in with batons—which Prof destroyed just as easily as he had the bullets. He wielded the sword in one hand, and his other hand sent out near-invisible blasts that reduced metal and kevlar to nothing. Dust streamed off soldiers who got too close to him, making them slip and stumble, suddenly unbalanced as helmets melted around their heads and body armor fell away.

Blood flew in front of high-powered flashlights, and men collapsed. It had been mere heartbeats since Prof had dropped into the room, but a good dozen of the soldiers were down.

The armored units had drawn their shoulder-mounted energy cannons, but Prof had gotten too close. He hit a patch of steel dust at a sprint, then slid in a crouch forward, moving on the dust with obvious familiarity. He twisted to the side and swung his forearm, *smashing* through the armored unit's leg. Powder sprayed out the back as Prof's arm passed completely through it.

He slid to a stop, still on one knee. The armor collapsed with a resounding *thud* as Prof leaped forward and drilled his fist

through the second armor's leg. He pulled his hand out and the leg bent, then snapped, the unit collapsing sideways. It fired a yellow-blue blast into the ground as it fell, melting a portion of the floor.

One foolhardy member of Enforcement tried to charge Prof, who stood over the fallen armors. Prof didn't bother with the sword. He dodged to the side, then slammed his fist forward. I could see the fist approach the soldier's face, could see the helmet's visor vaporizing just in front of Prof's punch.

The soldier dropped. The hallway grew silent. Sparkling steel flakes floated in beams of light like snow at midnight.

"I," Prof said in a powerful, self-assured voice, "am known as Limelight. Let your master know that I am *more* than aggravated by being forced to bother myself with you worms. Unfortunately, my minions are fools, and are incapable of following the simplest of orders.

"Tell your master that the time for dancing and playing is through. If he does not come to face me himself, I will dismantle this city piece by piece until I find him." Prof strode past the remaining soldiers without sparing them a glance.

He walked toward me, his back to the soldiers. I grew tense, waiting for them to try something. But they didn't. They cowered. Men did not fight Epics. They had been taught this, had it drilled into them.

Prof reached me, face shrouded in shadows, light shining from behind.

"That was *genius*," I said softly.

"Get the girl."

"I can't believe that you—"

Prof looked at me, and I finally caught sight of his features. Jaw clenched, eyes seeming to blaze with intensity. There was *contempt* in those eyes, and the sight of it caused me to stumble back in shock.

Prof seemed to be shaking, his hands forming fists, as if he were holding back something terrible. "Get. The. Girl."

I nodded dumbly, stuffing my gun back in my pocket and picking up Megan.

"Jon?" Tia's voice came from his mobile; mine was still on silent. "Jon, the soldiers have pulled out from my position. What's going on?"

Prof didn’t reply. He waved a tensored hand and the ground before us melted away. The dust drained, like sand in an hourglass, revealing an improvised tunnel to the lower levels below.

I followed him through the tunnel, and we made our escape.

PART FOUR

31

"ABRAHAM, more blood," Tia said, working with a frantic urgency. Abraham—his arm in a sling, which was stained red with his own blood—hastened to the cooler.

Megan lay on the steel conference table in the main room of our hideout. Stacks of paper and some of Abraham's tools lay on the floor where I'd swept them. Now I sat to the side, feeling helpless, exhausted, and terrified. Prof had burrowed us a path into the hideout from the back; the front entrance had been sealed by Tia using some metal plugs and a special type of incendiary grenade.

I didn't understand much of what Tia was doing as she worked on Megan. It involved bandages and attempts to stitch wounds. Apparently Megan had internal injuries. Tia found those even more distressing than the huge amounts of blood Megan had lost.

I could see Megan's face. It was turned toward me, angel's eyes closed softly. Tia had cut free most of Megan's clothing, revealing the extent of her wounds. Horrible wounds.

It seemed strange that her face was so serene. But I felt like I understood. I felt numb myself.

One step after another … I'd carried her back to the hideout. That time was a blur, a blur of pain and fright, of aching and dizziness.

Prof hadn't offered to help a single time. He'd almost left me behind at several points.

"Here," Abraham said to Tia, arriving with another pouch of blood.

"Hook it up," Tia said distractedly, working on Megan's side

opposite me. I could see her bloodied surgical gloves reflecting the light. She hadn't had time to change, and her regular clothing —a cardigan over a blouse and jeans—was now stained with streaks of red. She worked with intense concentration, but her voice betrayed panic.

Tia's mobile beeped a soft rhythm; it had a medical package, and she had set it on Megan's chest to detect her heartbeat. Tia occasionally picked it up to take quick ultrasounds of Megan's abdomen. With the part of my brain that could still think, I was impressed by the Reckoners' preparations. I hadn't even known that Tia had medical training, let alone that we had blood and surgical equipment in storage.

She shouldn't look that way, I thought, blinking out tears I hadn't realized were forming. *So vulnerable. Naked on the table. Megan is stronger than that. Shouldn't they cover her a little with a sheet or something as they work?*

I caught myself rising to fetch something to cover her, something to give a semblance of modesty, but then realized how stupid I was being. Each moment was crucial here, and I couldn't go blundering in and distract Tia.

I sat down. I was covered in Megan's blood. I couldn't smell it anymore; I guess my nose had gotten used to it.

She has to be okay, I thought, dazed. *I saved her. I brought her back. She* has *to be all right, now. That's the way it works*.

"This shouldn't be happening," Abraham said softly. "The harmsway …"

"It doesn't work on everyone," Tia said. "I don't know why. I *wish* I knew why, dammit. But it has never worked well on Megan, just like she always had trouble working the tensors."

Stop talking about her weaknesses! I screamed at them in my head.

Megan's heartbeat was getting even weaker. I could hear it, amplified by Tia's phone—*beep, beep, beep*. Before I knew it, I was standing up. I turned toward Prof's thinking room. Cody hadn't returned to the hideout; he was still watching the captured Epic in a separate location, as he'd been ordered. But Prof was here, in the other room. He'd walked straight there after arriving, not once looking at Megan or me.

"David!" Tia said sharply. "What are you doing?"

"I … I …," I stammered, trying to get out the words. "I'm going

to get Prof. He'll do something. He'll save her. He knows what to do."

"Jon can't do anything here," Tia said. "Sit back down."

The sharp order cut through my dazed confusion. I sat and watched Megan's closed eyes as Tia worked, swearing softly to herself. The curses almost matched the beat of Megan's heart. Abraham stood to the side, looking helpless.

I watched her eyes. Watched her serene, calm face as the beeps slowed. Then stopped. There was no flatline sound from the mobile. Just silence that carried a weight of meaning. Nothingness laden with data.

"This …," I said, blinking tears. "I mean, I carried her all the way here, Tia…."

"I'm sorry," Tia said. She raised a hand to her face, leaving a bloody mark on her forehead. Then she sighed and leaned back against the wall, looking exhausted.

"Do something," I said. Not an order. A plea.

"I've done what I can," Tia said. "She's gone, David."

Silence.

"Those wounds were bad," Tia continued. "You did everything you could. It's not your fault. To be honest, even if you'd been able to get her here immediately, I don't know if she'd have made it."

"I …" I couldn't think.

Cloth rustled. I glanced to the side. Prof stood in the doorway to his room. He'd dusted off his clothing, and he looked clean and dignified, a sharp contrast to the rest of us. His eyes flickered to Megan. "She's gone?" he asked. His voice had softened a little from before, though he still didn't sound like I felt he should.

Tia nodded.

"Gather what you can," Prof said, slinging a pack over his shoulder. "We're abandoning this position. It's been compromised."

Tia and Abraham nodded, as if they'd been expecting this order. Abraham did pause to lay a hand on Megan's shoulder and bow his head, and then he moved his hand to the pendant at his neck. He hurried off to gather his tools.

I took a blanket from Megan's bedroll—it didn't have sheets—and brought it back to lay over her. Prof looked at me, and he seemed about to object to the frivolous action, but he held his

tongue. I tucked the blanket around Megan's shoulders but left her head exposed. I don't know why people cover the face after someone dies. The face is the only thing left that is still right. I brushed it with my fingers. The skin was still warm.

This isn't happening, I thought numbly. *The Reckoners don't fail like this*.

Unfortunately, facts—my own facts—flooded my mind. The Reckoners *did* fail; members of the Reckoners *did* die. I'd researched this. I'd studied this. It happened.

It just shouldn't have happened to Megan.

I need to see her body cared for, I thought, bending down to pick her up.

"Leave the corpse," Prof said.

I ignored him, then felt him gripping my shoulder. I looked up through bleary eyes and found his expression harsh, eyes wide and angry. They softened as I looked at him.

"What's done is done," Prof said. "We'll burn out this hole, and that will be a fitting burial for her. Regardless, trying to bring the body would just slow us down, maybe get us killed. The soldiers are probably still watching the front position. We can't know how long it will take them to find the new hole I cut in here." He hesitated. "She's gone, son."

"I should have run faster," I whispered, in direct contrast to what Tia had said. "I should have been able to save her."

"Are you angry?" Prof asked.

"I …"

"Abandon the guilt," Prof said. "Abandon the denial. Steelheart did this to her. He's our goal. That has to be your focus. We don't have time for grief; we only have time for vengeance."

I found myself nodding. Many would have called those the wrong words, but they worked for me. Prof was right. If I moped and grieved, I'd die. I needed something to replace those emotions, something strong.

Anger at Steelheart. That would do it. He'd taken my father from me, and now he'd taken Megan too. I had a lurking understanding that so long as he lived, he'd take everything I loved from me.

Hate Steelheart. Use that to keep me going. Yes … I could do that. I nodded.

"Gather your notes," Prof said, "and then pack up the imager.

We're leaving in ten minutes, and we'll destroy anything we leave behind."

I looked back down the new tunnel Prof had cut into the hideout. Harsh red light glowed at its end, a funeral pyre for Megan. The blast Abraham had rigged was hot enough to melt steel; I could feel the heat from here, far away.

If Enforcement managed to cut into the hideout, all they'd find would be slag and dust. We had carried out what we could, and Tia had stashed a little more in a hidden pocket she'd had Abraham cut into a nearby corridor. For the second time in a month, I watched a home I'd known burn.

This one took something very dear with it. I wanted to say goodbye, to whisper it or at least think it. I couldn't get the word to form. I just … I guess I just wasn't ready.

I turned and followed the others, hiking away into the darkness.

An hour later I was still walking through the dark corridor, head down, pack slung on my back. I was so tired I could barely think.

It was odd, though—as strong as my hatred had been for a short time, now it was just lukewarm. Replacing Megan with hatred seemed a poor trade.

There was motion ahead and Tia fell back. She'd changed quickly from her bloodstained clothing. She'd also forced me to do so before abandoning the hideout. I'd washed my hands too, but there was still blood crusted under my fingernails.

"Hey," Tia said. "You're looking pretty tired."

I shrugged.

"Do you want to talk?"

"Not about her. Just … not right now."

"Okay. Then something else, maybe?" Something to distract you, her tone implied.

Well, maybe that would be nice. Except the only other thing I wanted to talk about was nearly as distressing. "Why is Prof so mad at me?" I asked softly. "He looked … He looked *indignant* that he had to come rescue me."

That made me sick. When he'd spoken to me via mobile, he'd seemed encouraging, determined to help. And then after … he

felt like another person. It lingered with him still, as he walked alone at the front of the group.

Tia followed my gaze. "Prof has some … bad memories attached to the tensors, David. He hates using them."

"But—"

"He's not mad at you," Tia said, "and he's *not* bothered by having to rescue you, regardless of how it might have seemed. He's mad at himself. He just needs some time alone."

"But he was so *good* with them, Tia."

"I know," she said softly. "I've seen it. There are troubles there you can't understand, David. Sometimes doing things we used to do reminds us of who we used to be, and not always in good ways."

That didn't make much sense to me. But then, my mind wasn't exactly the most crisp it had ever been.

We eventually reached the new bolt-hole, which was much smaller than the hideout—only two small rooms. Cody met us but spoke with a subdued tone. He'd been briefed, obviously, about what had happened. He helped us carry our equipment up into the main chamber of the new hideout.

Conflux, the head of Enforcement, was captive in there somewhere. Were we foolhardy to think we could hold him? Was this all part of another trap? I had to assume that Prof and Tia knew what they were doing.

As he worked, Abraham flexed his arm—the one that had taken a bullet. The little diodes of the harmsway flashed on his biceps, and the bullet holes had scabbed over already. A night sleeping with those diodes on and he'd be able to use the arm without trouble in the morning. A few days and the wound would only be a scar.

And yet, I thought, handing my pack to Cody and crawling through the tunnel to the upper chamber, *it didn't help Megan. Nothing we did helped Megan.*

I had lost a lot of people in the last ten years. Life in Newcago wasn't easy, particularly for orphans. But none of those losses had affected me this profoundly since my father's death. I guess it was a good thing—it meant I was learning to care again. Still, it felt pretty crappy at the moment.

When I came out of the entry tunnel and into the new hideout, Prof was telling everyone to bed down for the night. He wanted

us to have some sleep in us before we dealt with the captive Epic. As I arranged my bedroll, I heard him speaking with Cody and Tia. Something about injecting the captive Epic with a sedative so that he remained unconscious.

"David?" Tia asked. "You're wounded. I should hook up the harmsway to you and …"

"I'll live," I said. They could heal me tomorrow. I didn't care at the moment. Instead I lay down on my bedroll and turned over to face the wall. Then I finally let the tears come in force.

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ABOUT sixteen hours later I sat on the floor of the new hideout, eating a bowl of oatmeal sprinkled with raisins, harmsway diodes flashing on my leg and side. We'd had to leave most of our good food behind and were relying on storage that had been packed in the bolt-hole.

The other Reckoners gave me space. I found that odd, since they'd all known Megan longer than I had. It wasn't like she and I had actually shared anything special, even if she *had* begun warming up to me.

In fact, as I looked back on it, my reaction to her death seemed silly. I was just a boy with a crush. It still hurt, though. Badly.

"Hey, Prof," Cody said, sitting in front of a laptop. "You should see this, mate."

"Mate?" Prof asked.

"I've got a little bit of Australian in me," Cody said. "My father's grandfather was one-quarter Aussie. Been meaning to try it out for a spin."

"You're a bizarre little man, Cody," Prof said. He was back to his normal self, for the most part—maybe a little more solemn today. So were the rest of them, even Cody. Losing a teammate wasn't a pleasant experience, though I got the sense that they'd been through all of this before.

Prof studied the screen for a moment, then raised an eyebrow. Cody tapped, then tapped again.

"What is it?" Tia asked.

Cody turned the laptop around. None of us had chairs; we were all just sitting on our bedrolls. Even though this hideout was

smaller than the other, it felt empty to me. There weren't enough of us.

The screen was blue, with simple block letters in black. PICK A TIME AND LOCATION. I WILL COME.

"This," Cody said, "is all people can see on any of the one hundred entertainment channels in Steelheart's network. It's displayed on every mobile that logs on, and on every information screen in the city. Something makes me think we got through to him."

Prof smiled. "This is good. He's letting us pick the place for the fight."

"He usually does that," I said, staring into my oatmeal. "He let Faultline choose. He thinks it sends a message—this city is his, and he doesn't care if you try to find a place that gives you the better ground. He'll kill you anyway."

"I just wish I didn't feel blind," Tia said. She was sitting in the far corner with her datapad. It had her mobile stuck to the back so its display expanded what was on the mobile's screen. "It's baffling. How did they find out that I'd hacked their camera system? I'm locked out on all sides, every hole plugged. I can't see a thing of what's going on in the city."

"We'll pick a place where we can set up our own cameras," Prof said. "You won't be blind when we face him, Tia. It—"

Abraham's mobile beeped. He raised it up. "Proximity alarms say that our prisoner is stirring, Prof."

"Good," Prof said, standing up and looking toward the entrance to the smaller room that held our captive. "That mystery has been itching at me all day." As he turned, his eyes fell on me, and I caught a flash of guilt from him.

He moved past me quickly and began giving orders. We'd interrogate the prisoner with a light shining directly on him, Cody standing behind him with a gun to the Epic's head. Everyone was to wear their jackets. They'd replaced mine with a spare. It was black leather, too large for me by a size or two.

The Reckoners began moving to set things up. Cody and Tia entered the prisoner's room, eventually followed by Prof. I shoved a spoonful of oatmeal in my mouth, then noticed Abraham, who was lingering in the main room.

He walked over to me and knelt on one knee. "Live, David," he said softly. "Live your life."

“I’m doing that,” I grumbled.

“No. You are letting Steelheart live your life for you. He controls it, each step of the way. Live your own life.” He patted my shoulder, as if that made everything all right, then waved for me to come with him into the next room.

I sighed, climbed to my feet, and followed.

The captive was a spindly older man—perhaps in his sixties—balding and dark skinned. He was turning his head about, trying to figure out where he was, though he was still blindfolded and gagged. He certainly didn’t look threatening, strapped into his chair as he was. Of course many an “unthreatening” Epic could kill with little more than a thought.

Conflux wasn’t supposed to have powers like that. But then, Fortuity wasn’t supposed to have had heightened dexterity. Besides, we didn’t even know if this *was* Conflux. I found myself pondering the situation, which was good. At least it kept me from thinking about her.

Abraham aimed a large floodlight right at the captive’s face. Many Epics needed line of sight to use their powers on someone, so keeping the man disoriented had a very real and useful purpose. Prof nodded to Cody, who cut off the prisoner’s blindfold and gag, then stepped back and leveled a wicked .357 at the man’s head.

The prisoner blinked against the light, then looked about. He cringed in his chair.

“Who are you?” Prof asked, standing by the light where the prisoner wouldn’t be able to make out his features.

“Edmund Sense,” the prisoner said. He paused. “And you?”

“That is not important to you.”

“Well, seeing as to how you have me captive, I suspect it’s of *utmost* importance to me.” Edmund had a pleasant voice, with a faint Indian accent. He seemed nervous—his eyes kept darting from side to side.

“You’re an Epic,” Prof said.

“Yes,” Edmund answered. “They call me Conflux.”

“Head of Steelheart’s Enforcement troops,” Prof said. The rest of us remained quiet, as instructed, to not give the man an indication of how many were in the room.

Edmund chuckled. “Head? Yes, I suppose you could call me that.” He leaned back, closing his eyes. “Though, more

appropriately, I might be the heart. Or maybe just the battery."

"Why were you in the trunk of that car?" Prof asked.

"Because I was being transported."

"And you suspected your limo might be attacked, so you hid yourself in the trunk?"

"Young man," Edmund said pleasantly, "if I had wanted to hide, would I have had myself tied up, gagged, and blindfolded?"

Prof was silent.

"You wish for proof that I am who I say," Edmund said with a sigh. "Well, I'd rather not force you to beat it out of me. Do you have a mechanical device that has been drained of energy? No battery power at all?"

Prof looked to the side. Tia fished in her pocket and handed over a penlight. Prof tried it and no light came out. Then he hesitated. Finally he waved us out of the room. Cody remained, gun on Edmund, but the rest of us—Prof included—gathered in the main chamber.

"He might be able to overload it and make it explode," Prof said softly.

"We *will* need proof of who he is, though," Tia said. "If he can power that by touching it, then he's either Conflux or a different Epic with a *very* similar power."

"Or someone who Conflux gifted his abilities to," I said.

"He registers as a powerful Epic on the dowser," Abraham said. "We've tried it on Enforcement officers before who had powers given to them by Conflux, and it didn't register them."

"What if he's a different Epic?" Tia asked. "With some powers gifted by Conflux to show he can give energy to things and make us think he's Conflux? He could act harmless, then when we aren't expecting, turn his full powers on us."

Prof slowly shook his head. "I don't think so. That's just too convoluted, and too dangerous. Why would they think we would decide to kidnap Conflux? We could just as easily have killed him right there when we found him. I think this man is who he says he is."

"Why was he in the trunk, though?" Abraham asked.

"He'll probably answer if we ask him," I said. "I mean, he hasn't exactly been difficult so far."

"That's what worries me," Tia said. "It's too easy."

"Easy?" I asked. "Megan died so we could capture that guy. I

want to hear what he has to say."

Prof glanced at me, tapping the penlight against his palm. He nodded, and Abraham fetched a long wooden rod, which we tied the light to. We returned to the room, and Prof used the rod to touch the light to Edmund's cheek.

Immediately the flashlight's bulb started glowing. Edmund yawned, then tried to settle himself in his bonds.

Prof pulled the flashlight back; it continued to shine.

"I recharged the battery for you," Edmund said. "Might that be enough to persuade you to get me a drink …?"

"Two years ago," I said, stepping forward despite Prof's orders, "in July, you were involved in a large-scale project on Steelheart's behalf. What was it?"

"I don't really have a good sense of time …," the man said.

"It shouldn't be hard to remember," I said. "The people of the city don't know about it, but something odd happened to Conflux."

"Summer? Hmm … was that when I was taken out of the city?" Edmund smiled. "Yes, I remember the sunlight. He needed me to power some of his war tanks for some reason."

It had been an offensive against Dialas, an Epic in Detroit who had angered Steelheart by cutting off some of his food supplies. Conflux's part had been handled very covertly. Few knew of it.

Prof was looking at me, lips drawn to a tight line. I ignored him. "Edmund," I said, "you came to the city on what date?"

"Spring of 04 AC," he said.

Four years after Calamity. That clinched it for me—most people assumed that Conflux had joined Steelheart in 05 AC, when Enforcement had first gained mechanized units and the power outages of 04 AC had finally begun to stabilize. But inside sources that I'd carefully gathered claimed Steelheart hadn't trusted Conflux at first, and hadn't used him for important projects for nearly a year.

As I looked at this man, a lot of things from my notes about Conflux were starting to make sense. Why was Conflux never seen? Why was he transported as he was? Why the shroud, the mystery? It wasn't just because of Conflux's frailty.

"You're a prisoner," I said.

"Of course he is," Prof said, but Conflux nodded.

"No," I said to Prof. "He's always been a prisoner. Steelheart

isn't using him as a lieutenant, but as a power source. Conflux isn't in charge of Enforcement, he's just …"

"A battery," Edmund said. "A slave. It's all right, you can say it. I'm quite accustomed to it. I'm a valuable slave, which is actually an enviable position. I suspect it won't be too long before he finds us and kills you all for taking me." He grimaced. "I *am* sorry about that. I hate it terribly when people fight over me."

"All this time …," I said. "Sparks!"

Steelheart *couldn't* let it be known what he was doing to Conflux. In Newcago Epics were all but sacred. The more powerful they were, the more rights they had. It was the foundation of the government. The Epics lived by the pecking order because they knew, even if they were at the bottom, they were still far more important than the ordinary people.

But here was an Epic who was a slave … nothing more than a power plant. This had huge ramifications for everyone in Newcago. Steelheart was a liar.

I guess I shouldn't be too surprised, I thought. *I mean, after everything else he's done, this is a minor issue*. Still, it seemed important. Or maybe I was just latching on to the first thing that drew my attention away from Megan.

"Shut it down," Prof said.

"Excuse me?" Edmund said. "Shut down what?"

"You're a gifter," Prof said. "A transference Epic. Draw your power back from the people you've given it to. Remove it from the mechanized armors, the copters, the power stations. I want you to cut off every person you've granted your power."

"If I do that," Edmund said hesitantly, "Steelheart will *not* be pleased with me when he recovers me."

"You can tell him the truth," Prof said, raising a handgun in one hand so that it pointed out in front of the spotlight. "If I kill you, the power will go away. I'm not afraid to take that step. Recover your power, Edmund. Then we'll talk further."

"Very well," Edmund said.

And just like that, he all but shut down Newcago.

33

"I don't really think of myself as an Epic," Edmund said, leaning forward across the makeshift table. We'd made it out of a box and a plank, and we sat on the floor to eat at it. "I was captured and used for power only a month after my transformation. Bastion was my first owner's name. I'll tell you, was *he* unpleasant after we discovered I couldn't transfer my power to him."

"Why do you suppose that is?" I asked, chewing on some jerky.

"I don't know," Edmund said, raising his hands in front of himself. He liked to gesture a lot when he talked; you had to watch yourself, lest you get an accidental ninja punch to the shoulder during a particularly emphatic exclamation about the taste of a good curry.

That was about as dangerous as he got. Though Cody stayed near, his rifle never too far from him, Edmund hadn't been the least bit provocative. He actually seemed pleasant, at least when he wasn't mentioning our inevitable gruesome deaths at Steelheart's hands.

"That's the way it has always worked for me," Edmund continued, pointing at me with his spoon. "I can only gift them to ordinary humans, and I have to touch them to do it. I've never been able to give my powers to an Epic. I've tried."

Nearby, Prof—who had been carrying some supplies past—stopped in place. He turned to Edmund. "What was that you said?"

"I can't gift to other Epics," Edmund said, shrugging. "It's just the way the powers work."

"Is it that way for other gifters?" Prof asked.

"I've never met any," Edmund said. "Gifters are rare. If there are others in the city, Steelheart never let me meet them. He wasn't bothered by not being able to get my powers for himself; he was plenty happy using me as a battery."

Prof looked troubled. He continued on his way, and Edmund looked to me, his eyebrows raised. "What was that about?"

"I don't know," I said, equally confused.

"Well, anyway, continuing my story. Bastion didn't like that I couldn't gift him, so he sold me to a fellow named Insulation. I always thought that was a stupid Epic name."

"Not as bad as the El Brass Bullish Dude," I said.

"You're kidding. There's really an Epic named that?"

I nodded. "From inner LA. He's dead now, but you'd be surprised at the stupid names a lot of them come up with. Incredible cosmic powers do not equate with high IQ … or even a sense of what is dramatically appropriate. Remind me to tell you about the Pink Pinkness sometime."

"That name doesn't sound so bad," Edmund said, grinning. "It's actually a little self-aware. Has a smile to it. I'd like to meet an Epic who likes to smile."

I'm talking to one, I thought. I still hadn't quite accepted that. "Well," I said, "she didn't smile for long. She thought the name was clever, and then …"

"What?"

"Try saying it a few times really quickly," I suggested.

He moved his mouth, then a huge grin split his mouth. "Well, well, well …"

I shook my head in wonder as I continued eating my jerky. What to make of Edmund? He wasn't the hero people like Abraham and my father were looking for, not by a long shot. Edmund paled when we talked of fighting Steelheart; he was so timid, he often asked for permission to speak before voicing an opinion.

No, he wasn't some heroic Epic born to fight for the rights of men, but he was nearly as important. I'd *never* met, read of, or even caught a story of an Epic who so blatantly broke the stereotype. Edmund had no arrogance, no hatred, no dismissiveness.

It was baffling. Part of me kept thinking, *This is what we get? I finally find an Epic who doesn't want to kill or enslave me, and it's an*

old, soft-spoken Indian man who likes to put sugar in his milk?

"You lost someone, didn't you?" Edmund asked.

I looked up sharply. "What makes you ask?"

"Reactions like that one, actually. And the fact that everyone in your team seems to be walking on crumpled tinfoil and trying not to make any sound."

Sparks. Good metaphor. Walking on crumpled tinfoil. I'd have to remember that one.

"Who was she?" Edmund asked.

"Who said it was a she?"

"The look on your face, son," Edmund said, then smiled.

I didn't respond, though that was in part because I was trying to banish the flood of memories washing through my mind. Megan, glaring at me. Megan, smiling. Megan, laughing just a few hours before she died. *Idiot. You only knew her for a couple of weeks*.

"I killed my wife," Edmund said absently, leaning back, staring at the ceiling. "It was an accident. Electrified the counter while trying to power the microwave. Stupid thing, eh? I wanted a frozen burrito. Sara died for that." He tapped the table. "I hope yours died for something greater."

That will depend, I thought, *on what we do next*.

I left Edmund at the table and nodded to Cody, who was standing by the wall and doing a very good job of pretending he wasn't playing guard. I wandered into the other room, where Prof, Tia, and Abraham were sitting around Tia's datapad.

I almost went looking for Megan, my instincts saying she'd be standing guard outside the hideout, since all of the others were in here. Idiot. I joined the team, looking over Tia's shoulder at the screen of the enlarged mobile datapad. She was running it from one of the fuel cells we'd stolen from the power station. Once Edmund had withdrawn his abilities, the city power had gone out, including those wires that sometimes ran through the steel catacombs.

Her pad showed an old steel apartment complex. "No good," Prof said, pointing to some numbers at the side of the screen. "The building next to it is still populated. I'm not going to have a showdown with a High Epic when there are bystanders so close."

"What about in front of his palace?" Abraham asked. "He won't expect that."

“I doubt he’s expecting anything in particular,” Tia said. “Besides, Cody’s done some scouting. The looting has started, so Steelheart has pulled Enforcement in close to his palace. He’s really only got infantry left, but that’s enough. We’ll never get in to make any preparations. And we’re going to *need* to prepare the area if we’re going to face him.”

“Soldier Field,” I said softly.

They turned to me.

“Look,” I said, reaching over and scrolling along Tia’s map of the city. It felt downright primitive compared to the real-time camera views we’d been using.

I got the screen to an old portion of the city that was mostly abandoned. “The old football stadium,” I said. “Nobody lives nearby, and there’s nothing in the area to loot, so nobody will be around. We can use the tensors to tunnel in from a nearby point in the understreets. That will let us make preparations quietly, without worry that we’re being spied on.”

“It’s so open,” Prof said, rubbing his chin. “I’d rather face him in an old building, where we can confuse him and hit him from a lot of sides.”

“That will still work here,” I said. “He’ll almost certainly fly down into the middle of the field. We could put a sniper in the upper seats, and could carve ourselves a few unexpected tunnels —with rope lines—down through the seats into the stadium’s innards. We could baffle Steelheart and his minions by putting tunnels where they aren’t expected, and the terrain will be unfamiliar to his people—far more so than a simple apartment complex.”

Prof nodded slowly.

“We still haven’t addressed the real question,” Tia said. “We’re all thinking it. We might as well talk about it.”

“Steelheart’s weakness,” Abraham said softly.

“We’re too effective for our own good,” Tia said. “We’ve got him positioned, and we can bring him out to fight us. We can ambush him perfectly. But will that even matter?”

“So it comes to this,” Prof said. “Listen well, people. These are the stakes. We *could* pull out now. It would be a disaster—everyone would find out we’d tried to kill him and failed. That could do as much harm as killing him would do good. People would think that the Epics really are invincible, that even we

can't face someone like Steelheart.

"Beyond that, Steelheart would take it upon himself to personally hunt us down. He is not the type to give up easily. Wherever we go, we'd always have to watch and worry about him. But we could go. We don't know his weakness, not for certain. It might be best to pull out while we can."

"And if we don't?" Cody asked.

"We continue with the plan," Prof said. "We do everything we can to kill him, try out every possible clue from David's memory. We set up a trap in this stadium that combines all of those possibilities, and we take a chance. It will be the most uncertain hit I've ever been part of. One of those things could work, but more likely none of them will, and we will have entered into a fight with one of the most powerful Epics in the world. He'll probably kill us."

Everyone sat in silence. No. It couldn't end here, could it?

"I want to try," Cody said. "David's right. He's been right all along. Sneaking about, killing little Epics … that's not changing the world. We've got a chance at Steelheart. We have to at least *try*."

I felt a flood of relief.

Abraham nodded. "Better to die here, with a chance at defeating this creature, than to run."

Tia and Prof shared a look.

"You want to do it too, don't you, Jon?" Tia asked.

"Either we fight him here, or the Reckoners are finished," Prof said. "We'd spend the rest of our lives running. Besides, I doubt I could live with myself if I ran, after all we've been through."

I nodded. "We do have to at least try. For Megan's sake."

"I'll bet she would find that ironic," Abraham noted. We looked at him, and he shrugged. "She was the one who didn't want to do this job. I don't know what she'd think of us dedicating the end of it to her memory."

"You can be a downer, Abe," Prof said.

"The truth is not a downer," Abraham said in his lightly accented voice. "The lies that you pretend to accept are the true downer."

"Says the man who still believes the Epics will save us," Prof said.

"Gentlemen," Tia cut in. "Enough. I think we're all in

agreement. We're going to try this, ridiculous though it is. We'll try to kill Steelheart without any real idea what his weakness is."

One by one, we all nodded. We had to try.

"I'm not doing this for Megan," I finally said. "But I'm doing it, in part, *because* of her. If we have to stand up and die so that people will know that someone still fights, so be it. Prof, you said that you worry our failure will depress people. I don't see that. They'll hear our story and realize that there's an option other than doing what the Epics command. We may not be the ones to kill Steelheart. But even if we fail, we might be the cause of his death. Someday."

"Don't be so sure we'll fail," Prof said. "If I thought this was suicide for certain, I wouldn't let us continue. As I said, I don't intend to pin our hopes of killing him on a single guess. We'll try everything. Tia, what do your instincts say will work?"

"Something from the bank vault," she said. "One of those items is special. I just wish I knew which one."

"Did you bring them with you when we abandoned the old hideout?"

"I brought the most unusual ones," she said. "I stowed the rest in the pocket we made outside. We can fetch them. So far as I know, Enforcement hasn't found them."

"We take everything and spread it all out here," Prof said, pointing at the steel floor of the stadium, which had once been soil. "David's right; that's where Steelheart will probably land. We don't have to know specifically what weakened him—we can just haul it all over and use it."

Abraham nodded. "A good plan."

"What do you think it is?" Prof asked him.

"If I had to guess? I would say it was David's father's gun or the bullets it shot. Every gun is slightly distinctive in its own way. Perhaps it was the precise composition of the metal."

"That's easy enough to test," I said. "I'll bring the gun, and when I get a chance I'll shoot him. I don't think it will work, but I'm willing to try."

"Good," Prof said.

"And you, Prof?" Tia asked.

"I think it was because David's father was one of the Faithful," Prof said softly. He didn't look at Abraham. "Fools though they are, they're earnest fools. People like Abraham see the world

differently than the rest of us do. So maybe it was the way David's father viewed the Epics that let him hurt Steelheart."

I sat back, thinking it over.

"Well, it shouldn't be too hard for me to shoot him too," Abraham said. "In fact, we should probably all try it. And anything else we can think of."

They looked at me.

"I still think it's crossfire," I said. "I think Steelheart can only be harmed by someone who isn't intending to hurt him."

"That's tougher to arrange," Tia said. "If you're right, it probably won't activate if any of us hit him, since we actually want him dead."

"Agreed," Prof said. "But it's a good theory. We'd need to find a way to get his own soldiers to hit him by accident."

"He'd have to *bring* the soldiers first," Tia said. "Now that he's convinced there's a rival Epic in town, he might just bring Nightwielder and Firefight."

"No," I said. "He'll come with soldiers. Limelight has been using minions, and Steelheart will want to be ready—he'll want to have his own soldiers to deal with distractions like that. Besides, while he'll want to face Limelight himself, he'll also want witnesses."

"I agree," Prof said. "His soldiers will probably have orders not to engage unless fired upon. We can make certain they feel they need to start fighting back."

"Then we'll need to be able to stall Steelheart long enough to set up a good crossfire," Abraham said. He paused. "Actually, we'll need to stall him *during* the crossfire. If he assumes this is just an ambush of soldiers, he'll fly off and let Enforcement deal with it." Abraham looked at Prof. "Limelight will have to make an appearance."

Prof nodded. "I know."

"Jon …," Tia said, touching his arm.

"It's what must be done," he said. "We'll need a way to deal with Nightwielder and Firefight too."

"I'm telling you," I said, "Firefight won't be an issue. He's—"

"I know he's not what he seems, son," Prof said. "I accept that. But have you ever fought an illusionist?"

"Sure," I said. "With Cody and Megan."

"That was a weak one," Prof said. "But I suppose it gives you

an idea what to expect. Firefight will be stronger. *Much* stronger. I almost wish he was just another fire Epic."

Tia nodded. "He should be a priority. We'll need code phrases, in case he sends in illusory versions of the other members of the team to confuse us. And we'll have to watch for false walls, fake members of Enforcement intended to confuse, things like that."

"Do you think Nightwielder will even show?" Abraham asked. "From what I heard, David's little flashlight show sent him running like a rabbit before the hawk."

Prof looked to me and Tia.

I shrugged. "He might not," I said.

Tia nodded. "Nightwielder's a hard one to read."

"We should be ready for him anyway," I said. "But I'll be perfectly fine if he stays away."

"Abraham," Prof said, "you think you can rig up a UV floodlight or two using the extra power cells? We should arm everyone with some of those flashlights as well."

We fell silent, and I had a feeling we were all thinking the same thing. The Reckoners liked extremely well-planned operations, executed only after weeks or months of preparation. Yet here we were going to try to take down one of the strongest Epics in the world with little more than some trinkets and flashlights.

It was what we had to do.

"I think," Tia said, "we should come up with a good plan for extraction in case none of these things work."

Prof didn't look like he agreed. His expression had grown grim; he knew that if none of these ideas let us kill Steelheart, our chances of survival were slim.

"A copter will work best," Abraham said. "Without Conflux, Enforcement is grounded. If we can use a power cell, or even make him power a copter for us …"

"That will be good," Tia said. "But we'll still have to disengage."

"Well, we've still got Diamond in custody," Abraham said. "We could grab some of his explosives—"

"Wait," I said, confused. "In *custody*?"

"I had Abraham and Cody grab him the evening of your little encounter," Prof said absently. "Couldn't risk letting him say what he knew."

"But … you said he'd never …"

“He saw a hole made by the tensors,” Prof said, “and you were linked to him in Nightwielder’s mind. The moment they saw you at one of our operations, they’d grab Diamond. It was for his safety as much as our own.”

“So … what are you doing with him?”

“Feeding him a lot,” Prof said, “and bribing him to lie low. He was pretty unsettled by that run-in, and I think he was happy we took him.” Prof hesitated. “I promised him a look at how the tensors work in exchange for him remaining in one of our bolt-holes until this all blows over.”

I sat back against the wall of the room, disturbed. Prof hadn’t said it, but I could read the truth from his tone. The emergence of knowledge of the tensors would change the way the Reckoners worked. Even if we beat Steelheart, they had lost something great —no longer would they be able to sneak into places unexpectedly. Their enemies would be able to plan, watch, prepare.

I’d brought about the end of an era. They didn’t seem to blame me, but I couldn’t help feeling some guilt. I was like the guy who had brought the spoiled shrimp cocktail to the party, causing everyone to throw up for a week straight.

“Anyway,” Abraham said, tapping the screen of Tia’s datapad, “we could dig out a section under the field here with the tensors, leave an inch or so of steel, then pack the hole with explosives. If we have to punch out, we blow the thing, maybe take out some soldiers and use the confusion and smoke to cover our escape.”

“Assuming Steelheart doesn’t just chase us down and shoot the copter out of the sky,” Prof said.

We fell silent.

“I believe you said *I* was a downer?” Abraham asked.

“Sorry,” Prof replied. “Just pretend I said something self-righteous about truth instead.”

Abraham smiled.

“It’s a workable plan,” Prof said. “Though we might want to try to set up some kind of decoy explosion, maybe back at his palace, to draw him off. Abraham, I’ll let you handle that. Tia, can you send a message to Steelheart through these networks without being traced?”

“I should be able to,” she replied.

“Well, give him a response from Limelight. Tell him: ‘Be ready

on the night of the third day. You'll know the place when the time comes.' "

She nodded.

"Three days?" Abraham said. "Not much time."

"We really don't have much we need to prepare," Prof said. "Besides, anything longer would be too suspicious; he probably expects us to face him tonight. This will have to do, though."

The Reckoners nodded, and the preparations for our last fight began. I sat back, my anxiety rising. I was *finally* going to have my chance to face him. Killing him with this plan seemed almost as much a longshot as ever.

But I would finally get my chance.

34

THE vibrations shook me to the soul. It seemed that my soul vibrated back. I breathed in, shaping the sound with a thought, then thrust my hand forward and sent the music outward. Music only I could hear, music only I could control.

I opened my eyes. A portion of the tunnel in front of me collapsed into fine, powdery dust. I wore a mask, though Prof continued to assure me the stuff wasn't as bad to breathe as I thought.

I wore my mobile strapped to my forehead, shining brightly. The small tunnel through the steel was cramped, but I was alone, so I was able to move as much as I needed to.

As always, using the tensor reminded me of Megan and that day when we'd infiltrated the power station. It reminded me of the elevator shaft, where she'd shared with me things it seemed she hadn't shared with many. I'd asked Abraham if he'd known she was from Portland, and he'd seemed surprised. He said she never spoke about her past.

I scooped the steel dust into a bucket, then hauled it down the tunnel and dumped it. I did that a few more times, then got back to digging with the tensor. The others were hauling the dust the rest of the way out.

I added a few feet to the tunnel, then checked my mobile to see how I was doing. Abraham had set up three others above to create a kind of triangulation system that let me cut this tunnel with precision. I needed to go a bit more to the right, then I needed to angle upward.

Next time I pick a location to ambush a High Epic, I thought, *I'm*

going to choose one that's closer to established understreet tunnels.

The rest of the team agreed with Abraham that they should wire the field with explosives from below, and they also wanted a few hidden tunnels leading up to the perimeter. I was pretty sure we'd be happy to have those when we faced Steelheart, but building all of it was getting *very* tiring.

I almost regretted that I'd shown so much talent with the tensor. Almost. It was still pretty awesome to be able to dig through solid steel with just my hands. I couldn't hack like Tia, scout as well as Cody, or fix machinery like Abraham. This way, at least, I had a place in the team.

Of course, I thought as I vaporized another section of the wall, *Prof's ability makes mine look like a piece of rice. And not even a cooked one*. I was basically only useful in this role because he refused to take it. That dampened my satisfaction.

A thought occurred to me. I raised my hand, summoning the tensor's vibrations. How had Prof done it to make that sword? He'd pounded the wall, hadn't he? I tried to mimic the motion, pounding my fist against the side of the tunnel and directing the burst of energy in my mind from the tensor.

I didn't get a sword. I caused several handfuls of dust to stream out of a pocket in the wall, followed by a long lump of steel that looked vaguely like a bulbous carrot.

Well, it's a start. I guess.

I reached down to pick up the carrot, but caught sight of a light moving up the small tunnel. I quickly kicked the carrot into the pile of dust, then got back to work.

Prof soon moved up behind me. "How's it going?"

"Another couple of feet," I said. "Then I can carve out the pocket for the explosives."

"Good," Prof said. "Try to make it long and thin. We want to channel the explosion upward, not back down the tunnel here."

I nodded. The plan was to weaken the "roof" of the pocket, which would lie just below the center of Soldier Field. Then we'd seal the explosives in with some careful welding by Cody, directing the blast the direction we wanted it to go.

"You keep at it," Prof said. "For now I'll take care of carting off the dust for you."

I nodded, grateful for the chance to just spend more time with the tensor. It was Cody's. He'd given it up for me, as mine was

still a ripped, zombie-droopy-eyed mess. I hadn't asked Prof about the two he carried. It didn't seem prudent.

We worked in silence for a time, me carving out chunks of steel, Prof carting off the dust. He found my carrot sword and gave me an odd look. I hoped he didn't see me blush in the faint light.

Eventually my mobile beeped, telling me I was nearing the right depth. I carefully crafted a long hole at shoulder level. Then I reached in and began creating a small "room" to stuff the explosives into.

Prof walked back, carrying his bucket, and saw what I'd done. He checked his mobile, looking up at the ceiling, then rapped softly at the metal with a small hammer. He nodded to himself, though I couldn't tell any difference in the way it sounded.

"You know," I said, "I'm pretty sure these tensors defy the laws of physics."

"What? You mean destroying solid metal with your fingers isn't normal?"

"More than that," I said. "I think we get less dust than we should. It always seems to settle down and take up less space than the steel did—but it couldn't do that unless it was denser than the steel, which it can't possibly be."

Prof grunted, filling another bucket.

"Nothing about the Epics makes sense," I said, pulling a few armfuls of dust out of the hole I was making. "Not even their powers." I hesitated. "Particularly not their powers."

"True enough," Prof said. He continued filling his buckets. "I owe you an apology, son. For how I acted."

"Tia explained it," I said quickly. "She said you've got some things in your past. Some history with the tensors. It makes sense. It's okay."

"No, it's not. But it *is* what happens when I use the tensors. I … well, it's like Tia said. Things in my past. I'm sorry for how I acted. There was no justification for it, especially considering what you'd just been through."

"It wasn't so bad," I said. "What you did, I mean." *The rest was horrible.* I tried not to think about that long march with a dying girl in my arms. A dying girl I didn't save. I pushed forward. "You were amazing, Prof. You shouldn't just use the tensors when we face Steelheart. You should use them all the time. Think of what

—”

“STOP.”

I froze. The tone of his voice sent a spike of shock down my spine.

Prof breathed in and out deeply, his hands buried in steel dust. He closed his eyes. “Don’t speak like that, son. It doesn’t do me any good. Please.”

“All right,” I said carefully.

“Just … accept my apology, if you are willing.”

“Of course.”

Prof nodded, turning back to his work.

“Can I ask you something?” I said. “I won’t mention … you know. Not directly, at least.”

“Go ahead, then.”

“Well, you invented these things. Amazing things. The harmsway, the jackets. From what Abraham tells me, you had these devices when you founded the Reckoners.”

“I did.”

“So … why not make us something else? Another kind of weapon, based off the Epics? I mean, you sell knowledge to people like Diamond, and he sells it to scientists who are working to create technology like this. I figure you’ve got to be as good at it as any of them are. Why sell the knowledge and not use it yourself?”

Prof worked in silence for a few minutes, then walked over to help me pull dust out of the hole I was making. “That’s a good question. Have you asked Abraham or Cody?”

I grimaced. “Cody talks about daemons or fairies—which he claims the Irish totally stole from his ancestors. I can’t tell if he’s serious.”

“He’s not,” Prof said. “He just likes to see how people react when he says things like that.”

“Abraham thinks it’s because you don’t have a lab now, like you used to. Without the right equipment, you can’t design new technology.”

“Abraham is a very thoughtful man. What do *you* think?”

“I think that if you can find the resources to buy or steal explosives, cycles, and even copters when you need them, you could get yourself a lab. There’s got to be another reason.”

Prof dusted off his hands and turned to look at me. “All right. I

can see where this is going. You may ask one question about my past." He said it as if it were a gift, a kind of … penance. He had treated me poorly, in part because of something in his past. The recompense he gave was a piece of that past.

I found myself completely unprepared. What did I want to know? Did I ask how he'd come up with the tensors? Did I ask what it was that made him not want to use them? He seemed to be bracing himself.

I don't want to drag him through that, I thought. *Not if it affects him so profoundly*. I wouldn't want to do that any more than I would have wanted someone to drag me through memories of what had happened to Megan.

I decided to pick something more benign. "What *were* you?" I asked. "Before Calamity. What was your job?"

Prof seemed taken aback. "That's your question?"

"Yes."

"You're sure you want to know?"

I nodded.

"I was a fifth-grade science teacher," Prof said.

I opened my mouth to laugh at the joke, but the tone of his voice made me hesitate.

"Really?" I finally asked.

"Really. An Epic destroyed the school. It … it was still in session." He stared at the wall, emotion bleeding from his face. He was putting a mask up.

And here I thought it had been an innocent question. "But the tensors," I said. "The harmsway. You worked at a lab at some point, right?"

"No," he said. "The tensors and the harmsway don't belong to me. The others just assume I invented them. I didn't."

That revelation stunned me.

Prof turned away to gather up his buckets. "The kids at the school called me Prof too. It always sticks, though I'm not a professor—I didn't even go to graduate school. I only ended up teaching science by accident. It was the teaching itself that I loved. At least, I loved it back when I thought it would be enough to change things."

He walked off down the tunnel, leaving me to wonder.

• • •

“That’s it. Y’all can turn around now.”

I turned, adjusting the pack I was toting on my back. Cody, balanced on a ladder above me, lifted the welding mask from his face and wiped his brow with the hand not holding the torch. It was a few hours after I had carved out the pocket under the field. Cody and I had spent those hours carving smaller tunnels and holes throughout the stadium, with Cody spot welding where support was needed.

Our most recent project was making the sniper’s nest that would be my post at the beginning of the battle. It was at the front of the third level of seats on the west side of the stadium, at about the fifty-yard line, overhanging the top of the first deck. We didn’t want it to be visible from above, so I’d used the tensor to carve away a space under the floor, leaving only an inch of metal on top, except for two feet right near the front for my head and shoulders to poke out so I could aim a rifle through a hole in the low wall at the front of the deck.

Cody reached up from his perch on the ladder and jiggled the metal framework he had just welded to the bottom of the area I had hollowed out. He nodded, apparently satisfied it would support me when I lay in wait there in the sniper’s nest. The floor of that section of seating was too thin to hollow out a hole deep enough to hide in; the framework was our solution to that problem.

“Where to next?” I asked as Cody climbed down the ladder. “How about we do that escape hole farther up in the third deck?”

Cody slung his welding gear over his shoulder and cracked some kinks out of his back. “Abraham called to say he’s going to take care of the UV floodlights now,” he said. “He finished packing the explosives under the field a while ago, so it’s time for me to go weld down there. Y’all can handle the next hole on your own—but I’ll help you carry the ladder there. Good job on these holes so far, lad.”

“So you’re back to *lad*?” I asked. “What happened to *mate*?”

“I realized something,” Cody said, collapsing the ladder and tilting the top to one side. “My Australian ancestors?”

“Yeah?” I lifted the lower end of the ladder and followed him as he walked from the first deck of seats into the stadium innards.

“They came from Scotland originally. So if I want to be *really* authentic, I need to be able to speak Australian with a Scottish

accent."

We kept walking through the pitch-black space beneath the stands that was kind of like a large, curved hallway—I think it was called a concourse. The planned lower end for the next escape hole was in one of the restrooms down the hall. "An Australian-Scottish-Tennessean accent, eh?" I said. "You practicing it?"

"Hell no," Cody said. "I'm not crazy, lad. Just a little eccentric."

I smiled, then turned my head to look in the direction of the field. "We're really going to try this, aren't we?"

"We'd better. I bet Abraham twenty bucks that we'd win."

"I just … It's hard to believe. I've spent ten years planning for this day, Cody. Over half my life. Now it's here. It's nothing like what I'd pictured, but it's here."

"You should feel proud," Cody said. "The Reckoners have been doing what they've been doing for over half a decade. No changes, no real surprises, no big risks." He reached up to scratch his left ear. "I often wondered if we were getting stagnant. Never could gather the arguments to suggest a change. It took someone coming in from the outside to shake us up a wee bit."

"Attacking Steelheart is just a 'wee bit' of a shakeup?"

"Well, it's not like you've gotten us to do something *really* crazy, like trying to steal Tia's cola."

Outside the restroom, we set the ladder down and Cody wandered over to check on some explosives on the opposite wall. We intended to use them as distractions; Abraham was going to blow them when needed. I paused, then pulled out one of my eraser-like blasting caps. "Maybe I should put one of these on them," I said. "In case we need a secondary person to blow the explosives."

Cody eyed it, rubbing his chin. He knew what I meant. We'd only need a secondary person to blow the explosives if Abraham fell. I didn't like thinking about it, but after Megan … Well, we all seemed a whole lot more frail to me now than we once had.

"You know," Cody said, taking the blasting cap from me, "where I'd *really* like to have a backup is on the explosives under the field there. Those are the most important ones to detonate; they're going to cover our escape."

"I suppose," I said.

"Do you mind if I take this and stick it down there before I

weld it closed?" Cody asked.

"No, assuming Prof agrees."

"He likes redundancy," Cody said, slipping the blasting cap into his pocket. "Just keep that pen-dealy of yours handy. And *don't* push it by accident."

He sauntered back toward the tunnel under the field, and I took the ladder into the restroom to get to work.

I punched my fist out into open air, then ducked as the steel dust fell around me. *So that's how he did it*, I thought, flexing my fingers. I hadn't figured out the sword trick, but I was getting good at punching and vaporizing things in front of my fist. It had to do with crafting the tensor's sound waves so that they followed my hand in motion, creating kind of an … envelope around it.

Done right, the wave would course along with my fist. Kind of like smoke might follow your hand if you punch through it. I smiled, shaking my hand. I'd finally figured it out. Good thing too. My knuckles were feeling pretty sore.

I finished off the hole with a more mundane tensor blast, reaching up from the top of my ladder to sculpt the hole. Through it I could see a pure black sky. *Someday I'd like to see the sun again*, I thought. The only thing up there was blackness. Blackness and Calamity, burning in the distance directly above, like a terrible red eye.

I climbed up off the ladder and out into the upper third deck. I had a sudden, surreal flash of memory. This was near where I'd sat the one time I'd come to this stadium. My father had scrimped and saved to buy us the tickets. I couldn't remember which team we'd played, but I could remember the taste of the hot dog my father bought. And his cheering, his excitement.

I crouched down among the seats, keeping low just in case. Steelheart's spy drones were probably out of commission now that the city was without power, but he might have people scouting the city and looking for Limelight. It would be wise to remain out of sight as much as possible.

Fishing a rope out of my pack, I tied it around the leg of one of the steel seats, then sneaked back to the hole and down the ladder, returning to the bathroom below the second deck. Leaving the rope hanging for a quicker escape than the ladder would

allow, I stowed the ladder and my empty pack in one of the stalls and walked out toward the seats.

Abraham was waiting there for me, leaning against the entryway to the lower seating with his muscled arms crossed, his expression thoughtful.

“So, I take it the UV lights are hooked up?” I asked.

Abraham nodded. “It would have been beautiful to use the stadium’s own floodlights.”

I laughed. “I’d have liked to see that, making a bunch of lights work that had their bulbs turned to steel and fused to their sockets.”

The two of us stood there for a time, looking out at our battlefield. I checked my mobile. It was early morning; we planned to summon Steelheart at 5:00 a.m. Hopefully his soldiers would be exhausted from preventing lootings all night without any vehicles or power armor. The Reckoners usually worked on a night schedule anyway.

“Fifteen minutes until projected go time,” I noted. “Did Cody finish the welding? Prof and Tia back yet?”

“Cody completed the weld and is moving to his position,” Abraham said. “Prof will arrive momentarily. They were able to procure a copter, and Edmund has gifted Tia the ability to power it. She flew it outside of town to park it, so as to not give away our location.”

If things went sour, she’d time her flight back in so that she could sweep down and pick us up as the explosives went off. We’d also blast a smokescreen from the stands to cover our escape.

I agreed with Prof, though. You couldn’t outfly or outgun Steelheart in a copter. This was the showdown. We defeated him here or we died.

My mobile flashed, and a voice spoke into my ear. “I’m back,” Prof said. “Tia’s set too.” He hesitated a moment. “Let’s do this.”

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SINCE my post was right up against the front of the third deck, if I'd been standing I could have looked down over the edge toward the lowest level of seats. Huddled in my improvised hole, however, I couldn't see those—though I had a good view of the field.

This put me high enough to watch what was going on around the stadium, but I also had a route to ground if I needed to try firing my father's gun at Steelheart. The tunnel and rope farther up the deck would get me there quickly.

I'd drop down, then try to sneak up on him, if it came to that. It would be like trying to sneak up on a lion while armed only with a squirt gun.

I huddled in my spot, waiting. I wore my tensor on my left hand, my right hand holding the grip of the pistol. Cody had given me a replacement rifle, but for now it lay beside me.

Overhead, fireworks flared in the air. Four posts around the top of the stadium released enormous jets of sparks. I don't know where Abraham had found fireworks that were pure green, but the signal would undoubtedly be seen and recognized.

This was the moment. Would he really come?

The fireworks began to die down. "I've got something," Abraham said in our ears, his light French accent subtly emphasizing the wrong syllables. He had the high-point sniping position and Cody had the low-point sniping position. Cody was the better shot, but Abraham needed to be farther away, where he could be outside the fight. His job was to remotely turn on the floodlights or blow strategic explosives. "Yes, they're coming

indeed. A convoy of Enforcement trucks. No sign of Steelheart yet."

I holstered my father's gun, then reached to the side to pick up the rifle. It felt too new to me. A rifle should be a well-used, well-loved thing. Familiar. Only then can you know that it's trustworthy. You know how it shoots, when it might jam, how accurate the sights are. Guns, like shoes, are worst when they're brand-new.

Still, I couldn't rely on the pistol. I had trouble hitting anything smaller than a freight train with one of those. I'd need to get close to Steelheart if I wanted to try it. It had been decided that we'd let Abraham and Cody test out the other theories first before risking sending me in close.

"They're pulling up to the stadium," Abraham said in my ear.

"I've lost them."

"I can see them, Abraham," Tia said. "Camera six." Though she was outside of the city in the copter, with Edmund's gifted abilities to power it, she was monitoring a rig of cameras we'd set up for spying and for recording the battle.

"Got it," Abraham said. "Yes, they're fanning out. I thought they'd come straight in, but they're not."

"Good," Cody said. "That'll make it easier to get a crossfire going."

If Steelheart even comes, I thought. That was both my fear and my hope. If he didn't come, it would mean he didn't believe that Limelight was a threat—which would make it far easier for the Reckoners to escape the city. The operation would be a bust, but not for any lack of trying. I almost wanted that to be the case.

If Steelheart came and killed us all, the Reckoners' blood would be on my hands for leading them on this path. Once that wouldn't have bothered me, but now it itched at my insides. I peered toward the football field but couldn't see anything. I glanced back behind me, toward the upper stands.

I caught a hint of motion in the darkness—what looked like a flash of gold.

"Guys," I whispered. "I think I just saw someone up here."

"Impossible," Tia said. "I've been watching all the entrances."

"I'm telling you, I *saw* something."

"Camera fourteen … fifteen … David, there's nobody up there."

"Stay calm, son," Prof said. He was hiding in the tunnel we'd

made beneath the field, and would come out only when Steelheart appeared. It had been decided that we wouldn't try blowing the explosives down there until after we'd tried all the other ways to kill Steelheart.

Prof wore the tensors. I could tell he hoped he wouldn't have to use them.

We waited. Tia and Abraham gave a quiet running explanation of Enforcement's movements. The ground troops surrounded the stadium, secured all the exits they knew about, then slowly started to infiltrate. They set up gunnery positions at several points in the stands, but they didn't find any of us. The stadium was too large, and we were hidden too well. You could build a lot of interesting hiding places when you could tunnel through what everyone else assumed was un-tunnel-through-able.

"Tap me into the speakers," Prof said softly.

"Done," Abraham replied.

"I am not here to fight worms!" Prof bellowed, his voice echoing through the stadium, blasted from speakers we'd set up. "This is the bravery of the mighty Steelheart? To send little men with popguns to annoy me? Where are you, Emperor of Newcago? Do you fear me so?"

The stadium fell silent.

"You see that pattern the soldiers set up in the stands?" Abraham asked over our line. "They're being very deliberate. It's intended to ensure they don't hit one another with friendly fire. We're going to have trouble catching Steelheart in a crossfire."

I kept glancing over my shoulder. I saw no other movement in the seats behind me.

"Ah," Abraham said softly. "It worked. He's coming. I can see him in the sky."

Tia whistled softly. "This is it, kids. Time for the real party."

I waited, raising my rifle and using the scope to scan the sky. I eventually spotted a point of light in the darkness, getting closer. Gradually it resolved into three figures flying down toward the center of the stadium. Nightwielder floated amorphously. Firefight landed beside him, a burning humanoid form that was so bright he left afterimages in my eyes.

Steelheart landed between them. My breath caught in my throat, and I fell utterly still.

He'd changed little in the decade since he destroyed the bank.

He had that same arrogant expression, that same perfectly styled hair. That inhumanly toned and muscled body, shrouded in a black and silver cape. His fists glowed a soft yellow, wisps of smoke rising from them, and there was a hint of silver in his hair. Epics aged far more slowly than regular people, but they did age.

Wind swirled about Steelheart, blowing up dust that had collected on the silvery ground. I found I couldn't look away. My father's murderer. He was here, *finally*. He didn't seem to notice the junk from the bank vault. We'd strewn it around the center of the field and mixed it with garbage we'd brought in to mask what we'd done.

The items were easily as close to him now as they had been when he'd been in the bank. My finger twitched on the trigger of my rifle—I hadn't even realized it had moved to the trigger. I carefully removed it. I would see Steelheart dead, but it didn't *have* to be by my hand. I needed to remain hidden; my duty was to hit him with the pistol, and he was too far away for that at the moment. If I shot now, and the shot failed, I'd be revealing myself.

"Guess I get to start this party," Cody said softly. He was going to fire first to test the theory about the vault contents, as his position was the easiest to retreat from.

"Affirmative," Prof said. "Take the shot, Cody."

"All right, you slontze," Cody said softly to Steelheart. "Let's see if that junk was worth the trouble of hauling up here.…"

A shot rang in the air.

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I was zoomed in on Steelheart's face in the rifle scope. I could swear that I saw, quite distinctly, the bullet hit the side of his head, disturbing his hair. Cody was right on target, but the bullet didn't even break the skin.

Steelheart didn't flinch.

Enforcement reacted immediately, men shouting, trying to determine the source of the shot. I ignored them, staying focused on Steelheart. He was all that mattered.

More shots fired; Cody was making certain he had hit his mark. "Sparks!" Cody said. "I didn't catch sight of any of the shots. One of those has to have landed, though."

"Can anyone confirm?" Prof asked urgently.

"Hit confirmed," I said, eye still to my scope. "It didn't work."

I heard muttered cursing from Tia.

"Cody, move," Abraham said. "They've caught your location."

"Phase two," Prof said, voice firm—anxious, but in control.

Steelheart turned about with a leisurely air—hands glowing—and regarded the stadium. He was a king inspecting his domain. Phase two was for Abraham to blow some distractions and try to get a crossfire going. My role was to sneak forward with the pistol and get in position. We wanted to keep Abraham's position secret as long as possible, so he could use explosions to try to move the Enforcement officers around.

"Abraham," Prof said. "Get those—"

"Nightwielder's moving!" Tia interrupted. "Firefight too!"

I forced myself to pull back from my scope. Firefight had become a streak of burning light heading toward one of the

entrances to the concourse beneath the stands. Nightwielder was moving up into the air.

He was flying right toward where I was hiding.

Impossible, I thought. *He can't—*

Enforcement started firing from the positions they had set up, but they weren't shooting toward Cody. They were shooting toward other areas in the stands. I was confused for a moment until the first hidden UV floodlight exploded.

"They're on to us," I cried, pulling back. "They're shooting out the floodlights!"

"Sparks!" Tia said as each of the other floodlights exploded in a row, shot out by various members of Enforcement. "There's no way they spotted all of those!"

"Something's wrong here," Abraham said. "I'm blowing the first distraction." The stadium shook as I slung my rifle over my shoulder and climbed out of my hole. I raced up a flight of steps in the stands.

The gunfire below sounded soft compared to what I'd experienced a few days ago in the corridors.

"Nightwielder is on to you, David!" Tia said. "He *knew* where you were hiding. They must have been watching this place."

"That doesn't make sense," Prof said. "They'd have stopped us earlier, wouldn't they?"

"What's Steelheart doing?" Cody asked, breathing hard as he ran.

I was barely listening. I dashed for the escape hole in the ground up ahead, not looking over my shoulder. The shadows from the seats around me began to lengthen. Tendrils grew like elongating fingers. In the middle of that, something splashed sparks along the steps in front of me.

"Enforcement sharpshooter!" Tia said. "Targeting you, David."

"Got him," Abraham said. I couldn't pick Abraham's sniper shot out of the gunfire, but no further shots came after me. Abraham might have just revealed himself, though.

Sparks! I thought. This was all going to Calamity really quickly. I hit the rope and fumbled with my flashlight. Those shadows were alive, and they were getting close. I got the flashlight on, shining it to destroy the shadows around the hole, then grabbed the rope with one hand and slid down. Fortunately the UV light affected Nightwielder's shadows as well as it did him personally.

“He’s still after you,” Tia said. “He …”

“What?” I asked urgently, holding the rope with the tensor glove, feet wrapped around it to slow my fall. I passed through open air beneath the third deck of seats, above the second deck. My hand grew hot with the friction, but Prof claimed the tensor could handle that without ripping.

I dropped through the hole in the second deck and through the ceiling of the restroom, emerging into the complete darkness of the concourse. This was where things like the concession stands were. At one time the outside of the place had all been glass—but that was now steel, of course, and so the stadium felt enclosed. Like a warehouse.

I could still hear gunshots, faint, echoing slightly in the hollow confines of the stadium. My flashlight shone mostly UV light through its filter, but it did glow a faint, quiet blue.

“Nightwielder sank into the stands,” Tia whispered to me. “I lost track of him. I think he did it to hide from cameras.”

So we’re not the only ones with that trick, I thought, heart thumping in my chest. He’d come for me. He had a vendetta—he knew I’d been the one to figure out his weakness.

I shined the flashlight about anxiously. Nightwielder would be on me in a second, but he would know that I was armed with UV light. Hopefully that would keep him wary. I unholstered my father’s pistol, wielding the flashlight in one hand and the gun in the other, my new rifle slung over my shoulder.

I have to keep moving, I thought. *If I can stay ahead of him, I can lose him*. We had tunnels in and out of places like the restrooms, the offices, the locker rooms, and the concession stands.

The UV flashlight gave off very little visible illumination, but I was an understreeter. It was enough. It did have the odd effect of making things that were white glow with a phantom light, and I worried that would give me away. Should I turn off the flashlight and go by touch?

No. It was also my only weapon against Nightwielder. I wasn’t about to go around blind when facing an Epic who could strangle me with shadows. I crept down the tomblike hallway. I needed to

—

I froze. What had that been in the shadows ahead? I turned my flashlight back toward it. The light shone across discarded bits of trash that had fused to the ground in the Great Transfersion,

some formerly retractable stanchions for line control, a few posters frozen on the wall. Some more recent trash, glowing white and ghostly.

What had I …

My light fell on a woman standing quietly in front of me. Beautiful hair I knew would be golden if I were seeing it under normal light. A face that seemed too perfect, tinged blue in the UV beam, as if sculpted from ice by a master artist. Curves and full lips, large eyes. Eyes I knew.

Megan.

37

BEFORE I had a chance to do more than gape, the shadows around me started to writhe. I dodged to the side as several of them speared through the air where I'd been standing. Though it seemed as if Nightwielder could animate shadows, really he exuded a black mist that pooled in darkness. That was what he could manipulate.

He could have very fine control over a few tendrils of it, but usually he opted for large numbers of them, probably because it was more intimidating. Controlling so many was more difficult, and he could basically just grab, constrict, or stab. Every patch of darkness around me started forming spears that sought my blood.

I dodged between them, eventually having to roll to the ground to get under a group of attacks. Doing a dodging roll on a steel floor is *not* a comfortable experience. When I came up, my hip was smarting.

I leaped over several of the steel crowd control stanchions, sweating and shining my flashlight at any suspicious shadows. I couldn't turn it all directions at once, though, and I had to keep spinning to avoid the ones at my back. I paid vague attention to the chatter from the other Reckoners in my ear, though I was too busy trying to not be killed to digest much of it. It seemed that things were in chaos. Prof had revealed himself to hold Steelheart's attention; Abraham had been located because of his shot to save me. Both he and Cody were on the run, fighting Enforcement soldiers.

A blast rocked the stadium, the sound traveling down the hallway and washing over me like stale cola through a straw. I

threw myself over the last of the steel stanchions and found myself shining the light frantically about me to stop spear after spear of blackness.

Megan was no longer where she'd been standing. I could almost believe she'd been a trick of my mind. Almost.

I can't keep this up, I thought as a black spear struck my jacket and was rebuffed by the shielding. I could feel the hit through my sleeve, and the diodes on the jacket were beginning to flash. This jacket seemed a *lot* weaker than the one I'd worn before. Maybe it was a prototype.

Sure enough, the next spear that caught me ripped through the jacket and sliced my skin. I cursed, shining the light on another patch of inky, oily blackness. Nightwielder was going to have me soon if I didn't change tactics.

I had to fight smarter. *Nightwielder has to be able to see me to use his spears on me*, I thought. So he was nearby—yet the hallway seemed empty.

I stumbled, which saved me from a spear that nearly took off my head. *Idiot*, I thought. He could move through walls. He wouldn't just stand in the open; he'd barely be peeking out. All I needed to do was …

There! I thought, catching a glimpse of a forehead and eyes peering out from the far wall. He looked pretty stupid, actually, like a kid in the deep end of a pool thinking he was invisible because he was mostly submerged.

I shined the light on him and tried to get a shot off at the same time. Unfortunately I'd switched hands so I could have the flashlight in my right hand—which meant I was firing with my left. Have I mentioned my thoughts on pistols and their accuracy?

The shot went wild. Like, *way* wild. Like I came closer to hitting a bird flying above the stadium outside than I did Nightwielder. But the flashlight worked. I wasn't sure what would happen if his powers vanished while he was phasing through an object. Unfortunately it looked like it didn't kill him—his face was jerked back through the wall as he became corporeal again.

I didn't know what was on the other side of that wall. It was opposite the field. Was he outside, then? I couldn't stop to look up the map on my phone. Instead I ran for a nearby concession stand. We'd dug a tunnel through there, wrapping down through the floor. Hopefully, if I could keep moving while Nightwielder

was outside, he'd have trouble tracking me down once he peeked in again.

I got into the concession stand and crawled inside the tunnel. "Guys," I whispered into my mobile as I moved, "I saw Megan."

"You *what*?" Tia asked.

"I saw *Megan*. She's alive."

"David," Abraham said. "She's dead. We all know this."

"I'm telling you I saw her."

"Firefight," Tia said. "He's trying to get to you."

As I crawled I felt a sharp sinking feeling. Of course—an illusion. But … something felt wrong about that.

"I don't know," I said. "The eyes were *right*. I don't think an illusion could be that detailed—that lifelike."

"Illusionists wouldn't be worth much if they weren't able to create realistic puppets," Tia said. "They need to— Abraham, not left! The other way. In fact, throw a grenade down there if you can."

"Thanks," he said, puffing slightly. I could hear an explosion twice—once through his microphone. A distant portion of the stadium shook. "Phase three is a failure, by the way. I got a shot off on Steelheart right after I revealed myself. It didn't do anything."

Phase three was Prof's theory—that one of the Faithful could hurt Steelheart. If Abraham's bullets had bounced off, then it wasn't viable. We only had two other ideas. The first was my theory of crossfire; the other was the theory that my father's gun or bullets were in some way special.

"How's Prof holding up?" Abraham asked.

"He's holding up," Tia said.

"He's *fighting* Steelheart," Cody said. "I've only been able to see a little, but— Sparks! I'm going offline for a moment. They're almost on me."

I crouched in the narrow tunnel, trying to sort through what was happening. I could still hear a lot of gunfire and the occasional blast.

"Prof's keeping Steelheart distracted," Tia said. "We still don't have any confirmed crossfire hits, though."

"We're trying," Abraham said. "I'll get this next group of soldiers to follow me around the corridor, and then let Cody goad them into firing across the field at him. That might work. David,

where are you? I might need to set off a distraction blast or two to flush out the soldiers behind cover on your side."

"I'm taking the second concessions tunnel," I said. "I'll be coming out on the ground floor, near the bear. I'll head westward after that." *The bear* meant a giant stuffed bear that had been part of some promotion during the football season, but which was now frozen in place like everything else.

"Got it," Abraham said.

"David," Tia said. "If you saw an illusion, it means you've got both Firefight and Nightwielder on you. On one hand that's good—we were wondering where Firefight ran off to. It's bad for you, though—you've got two powerful Epics to deal with."

"I'm telling you, that wasn't an illusion," I said, cursing as I tried to juggle the gun and the flashlight. I searched in my cargo pocket, fishing out my industrial tape. My father had told me to always keep that industrial tape handy; I'd been surprised, as I grew older, how good that advice had been. "She was real, Tia."

"David, think about that for a moment. How would Megan have gotten here?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe they … did something to revive her…."

"We flash-burned everything in the hideout. She'd have been cremated."

"There would have been DNA, maybe," I said. "Maybe they have an Epic who can bring someone back or something like that."

"Durkon's Paradox, David. You're searching too hard."

I finished taping the flashlight to the side of the barrel of my rifle—not on the top, as I wanted to be able to use the sights. That left the weapon off balance and clunky, but I felt I'd still be better with it than the handgun. I stuffed that into its holster under my arm.

Durkon's Paradox referred to a scientist who had studied and pondered the Epics during the early days. He'd pointed out that, with Epics breaking known laws of physics, literally anything was possible—but he warned against the practice of theorizing that every little irregularity was caused by an Epic's powers. Often that kind of thinking led to no actual answers.

"Have you *ever* heard of an Epic who could restore another person to life?" Tia said.

"No," I admitted. Some could heal, but none could reanimate someone else.

"And weren't you the one who said we were probably facing an illusionist?"

"Yes. But how would they know what Megan looked like? Why wouldn't they use Cody or Abraham to distract me, someone they know is here?"

"They would have her on video from the Conflux hit," Tia said. "They're using her to confuse you, unhinge you."

Nightwielder *had* nearly killed me while I was staring at the phantom Megan.

"You were right about Firefight," Tia continued. "As soon as that fire Epic was out of sight of the Enforcement officers, it vanished from my video feeds. That was just an illusion, meant to distract. The real Firefight is someone else. David, they're trying to play you so that Nightwielder can kill you. You *have* to accept this. You're letting your hopes cloud your judgment."

She was right. Sparks, but she was right. I halted in the tunnel, breathing in and out deliberately, forcing myself to confront it. Megan was dead. Now Steelheart's minions were playing with me. It made me angry. No, it made me *furious*.

It also brought up another problem. Why would they risk revealing Firefight like that? Letting him vanish after getting out of sight when it was likely we had the place under surveillance? Using an illusion of Megan? These things exposed Firefight for what he was.

That gave me a chill. They knew. They *knew* we were on to them, so they didn't need to pretend. *They also knew where we'd placed the UV floodlights*, I thought, *and where some of us were hiding*.

Something strange was going on. "Tia, I think—"

"Will you fools stop blathering," Prof said, his voice rough, harsh. "I need to concentrate."

"It's all right, Jon," Tia said comfortingly. "You're doing all right."

"Bah! Idiots. All of you."

He's using the tensors, I thought. *It's almost like they turn him into another person.*

There wasn't time to think about that. I simply hoped we all lived long enough for Prof to apologize. I climbed out of the

tunnel behind some tall steel equipment cases and panned my rifle with mounted flashlight around the corridor.

I was saved from the strike by a fluke. I thought I saw something in the distance, and I lunged toward it, trying to get more light on it. As I did, three spears of darkness struck at me. One sliced clean through the back of my jacket and cut a line through my flesh. Just another fraction of an inch and it would have severed my spine.

I gasped, spinning around. Nightwielder stood nearby in the cavernous room. I fired a shot at him, but nothing happened. I cursed, getting closer, rifle to my shoulder and the UV light streaming before me.

Nightwielder smiled a devilish grin as I put a bullet through his face. Nothing. The UV wasn't working. I froze in place, panicked. Was I wrong about his weakness? But it had worked before. Why —

I spun about, barely stopping a group of spears. The light dispersed them as soon as it touched them, so it was still working. So what was happening?

Illusion, I thought, feeling stupid. *Slontze. How many times am I going to fall for that?* I scanned the walls. Sure enough, I caught a glimpse of Nightwielder staring out from one of them toward me. He pulled back before I could fire, and the darkness fell motionless again.

I waited, sweating, focused on that point. Maybe he'd peer out again. The fake Nightwielder was just to my right, looking impassive. Firefight was in the room somewhere. Invisible. He could gun me down. Why didn't he?

Nightwielder peeked out again, and I fired, but he was gone in an eyeblink and the shot ricocheted off the wall. He'd probably come at me from another direction, I decided, so I took off running. As I ran I swiped the butt of my gun through the fake Nightwielder. As I expected, it passed right through, the apparition wavering faintly like a projected image.

Explosions sounded. Abraham cursed in my ear.

"What?" Tia asked.

"Crossfire doesn't work," Cody said. "We got a big group of soldiers to fire on each other through the smoke, without their realizing that Steelheart was in the middle."

"At *least* a dozen shots hit him," Abraham said. "That theory is

dead. I repeat, accidental fire does *not* hurt him."

Calamity! I thought. And I'd been so sure about that theory. I ground my teeth, still running. *We're not going to be able to kill him*, I thought. *This is all going to be meaningless*.

"I'm afraid that I can confirm," Cody said. "I saw the bullets hit too, and he didn't even notice." He paused. "Prof, you're a machine. Just thought I'd say that."

Prof's only response was a grunt.

"David, how are you handling Nightwielder?" Tia asked. "We need you to activate phase four. Shoot Steelheart with your father's gun. It's all we have left."

"How am I handling Nightwielder?" I asked. "*Poorly*. I'll get out there when I can." I continued jogging down the large, open concourse beneath the seating. Maybe if I could get outside I'd have a better time of it. There were too many hiding places in here.

He was waiting *for me when I came out of that tunnel*, I thought. *They've got to be listening in on our conversations. That's how they knew so much about our initial setup*.

That, of course, was impossible. Mobile signals were unhackable. The Knighthawk Foundry made sure of that. And beyond that, the Reckoners were on their own network.

Except …

Megan's mobile. It was still connected to our network. Had I ever mentioned to Prof and the others that she'd lost it in the fall? I'd assumed it was broken, but if it hadn't been …

They listened in on our preparations, I thought. *Did we mention over the lines that Limelight wasn't real?* I thought hard, trying to remember our conversations over the last three days. I came up blank. Maybe we'd talked about it, but maybe not. The Reckoners tended to be circumspect about their conversations over the network, just to be extra careful.

Further speculation was cut off as I spotted a figure in the hallway in front of me. I slowed, rifle to shoulder, drawing a bead on it. What would Firefight try this time?

Another image of Megan, just standing there. She wore jeans and a tight red button-up shirt—but no Reckoner jacket—her golden hair pulled back in a shoulder-length ponytail. Wary, in case Nightwielder attacked me from behind, I moved past the illusion. It watched me with a blank expression but didn't move

otherwise.

How could I find Firefight? He'd be invisible, probably. I wasn't certain he had that power, but it made sense.

Ways of revealing an invisible Epic ran through my mind. Either I had to listen for him or I had to fog the air with something. Flour, dirt, dust … maybe I could use the tensor somehow? Sweat trickled down my brow. I *hated* knowing that someone was watching me, someone I couldn't see.

What to do? My initial plan to deal with Firefight had been to reveal I knew his secret, to scare him off as I had Nightwielder during the Conflux hit. That wouldn't work now. He knew we were on to him. He needed to see the Reckoners dead to hide his secret. *Calamity, Calamity, Calamity!*

The illusion of Megan turned its head, following me as I tried to watch all corners of the room and listen for movement.

The illusion frowned. "I know you," she said.

It was her voice. I shivered. *A powerful Epic illusionist would be able to create sounds with their images*, I told myself. *I* know *that's true. No need to be surprised.*

But it was her voice. How did Firefight know her voice?

"Yes …," she said, walking toward me. "I do know you. Something about … about knees." Her eyes narrowed at me. "I should kill you now."

Knees. Firefight couldn't know about that, could he? Had Megan called me that name over the mobile? They couldn't have been listening back then, could they?

I wavered, my gun's sights on her. The illusion. Or was it Megan? Nightwielder would be coming. I couldn't just stand there, but I couldn't run either.

She was walking toward me. Her arrogant expression made her look like she owned the world. Megan had acted like that before, but there was something more here. Her bearing was more confident, even though she had pursed her lips, perplexed.

I had to know. I *had* to.

I lowered the gun and leaped forward. She reacted, but too slowly, and I grabbed her arm.

It was real.

A second later, the hallway exploded.

38

I coughed, rolling over. I was on the ground, my ears ringing. Bits of trash burned nearby. I blinked away the afterimages in my eyes, shaking my head.

"What was that?" I croaked.

"David?" Abraham said in my ear.

"An explosion," I said, groaning and pulling myself up to my feet. I looked around the hallway. Megan. Where was she? I couldn't see her anywhere.

She'd been real. I had felt her. That meant it wasn't an illusion, right? Was I losing my mind?

"Calamity!" Abraham said. "I thought you were down the other end of the concourse. You said you'd go westward!"

"I ran to get away from Nightwielder," I said. "I ran the wrong way. I'm a slontze, Abraham. Sorry."

My rifle. I saw the stock sticking out of a nearby pile of trash. I pulled it out. The rest of the gun wasn't attached. *Sparks!* I thought. *I'm having a devil of a time holding on to these lately*.

I found the rest of the gun nearby. It *might* still work, but without a stock I'd be firing from the hip. The flashlight was still strapped to it, however, and still shining, so I snatched the whole thing up.

"What's your condition?" Tia asked, voice tense.

"A little stunned," I said, "but all right. It wasn't close enough to hit me with anything more than the concussion."

"Those will be amplified in these hallways," Abraham said. "Calamity, Tia. We're losing control of this situation."

"Damn you all," Prof's voice said, sounding feral. "I want David

out here now. Bring me that gun!"

"I'm coming to help you, lad," Cody said. "Stay put."

A sudden thought struck me. If Steelheart and his people really were listening in on our private line, I could use that.

The idea warred with my desire to hunt for Megan. What if she was hurt? She had to be around here somewhere, and there seemed to be a lot more rubble in the hallway now. I needed to see if …

No. I *couldn't* afford to be tricked. Maybe that had been Firefight, wearing Megan's face to distract me.

"Okay," I said to Cody. "You know the restrooms near the fourth bomb position? I'm going to hide in there until you arrive."

"Got it," Cody said.

I dashed away, hoping that Nightwielder, wherever he was, had been disoriented by the blast. I neared the restrooms I'd mentioned to Cody, but I didn't go into them as I'd said. Instead I found a spot nearby and used my tensor to blast a hole into the ground. This was a place where I'd be relatively well hidden but would also have a good view of the rest of the corridor—restrooms included.

I dug the hole deep, then burrowed down in it as Prof had taught me, using the dust to cover up. Soon I was like a soldier in a foxhole, carefully hidden. I turned my mobile to silent and buried my half rifle just under the surface of the dust, so the light from the flashlight was concealed.

Then I watched the door to that restroom. The corridor fell silent. Lit only by burning scraps.

"Is anyone there?" a voice called into the hallway. "I … I'm hurt."

I tensed. That was Megan.

It's a trick. It has to be.

I scanned the dim room. There, on the other side of the hallway, I saw an arm wedged in a mountain of rubble from the blast. Chunks of steel, some fallen girders from above. The arm twitched, and blood ran down the wrist. As I looked closer, I could see her face and torso in the shadows. She looked like she was only now beginning to stir, as if she'd been briefly knocked unconscious by the blast.

She was pinned. She was hurt. I had to move, to go help her! I

stirred but then forced myself down.

"Please," she said. "Please, someone. Help me."

I didn't move.

"Oh Calamity. Is that my blood?" She struggled. "I can't move my legs."

I squeezed my eyes shut. How were they doing this? I didn't know what to trust.

Firefight is doing it somehow, I told myself. *She's not real.*

I opened my eyes. Nightwielder was emerging from the floor in front of the bathroom. He looked confused, as if he'd been inside looking for me. He shook his head and walked through the corridor, searching about him.

Was that really him, or was it an illusion? Was any of this real? The stadium shook with another blast, but the gunfire outside was dying down. I needed to do something, quickly, or Cody would stumble into Nightwielder.

Nightwielder stopped in the center of the hallway and crossed his arms. His normal calm had been shattered and he looked annoyed. Finally he spoke. "You're in here somewhere, aren't you?"

Dared I take the shot? What if he was the illusion? I could get myself killed by the real Nightwielder if I exposed myself. I turned carefully, examining the walls and floor. I saw nothing other than some darkness creeping from the shadows nearby, tendrils moving like hesitant animals seeking food. Testing the air.

If Firefight was really pretending to be Megan, then shooting her would stop the illusions. I'd be left only with the real Nightwielder, wherever he was. But there was a good chance that the fallen Megan was a full illusion. Sparks, the *girders* could be an illusion. Would a distant blast have really knocked those down?

What if that was Firefight, though, wearing Megan's face so that if I touched her I'd feel something real? I raised my father's gun and sighted on her bloodied face. I hesitated, heart pounding in my ears. Surely Nightwielder could hear that pounding. It was all that I could hear. What would I do to get to Steelheart? Shoot Megan?

She's not real. She can't be real.

But what if she is?

Heartbeats, like thunder.

My breath, held.

Sweat on my brow.

I made my decision and leaped from the foxhole, bringing up the rifle in my left hand—light shining forward—and the handgun in my right. I let loose with both.

On Nightwielder, not Megan.

He spun toward me as the light hit him, eyes wide, and the bullets ripped through him. He opened his mouth in horror and blood sprayed out his back. His *solid* back. He dropped, turning translucent again the moment he got out of the direct line of my flashlight. He hit the ground and began to sink into it.

He only sank halfway. He froze there, mouth open, chest bleeding. He solidified slowly—it was almost like the view from a camera coming into focus—half sunken in the steel floor.

I heard a click and turned. Megan stood there, a gun in her hand. A handgun, a P226 just like she preferred to carry. The other version of her, the one trapped by rubble, vanished in a heartbeat. So did the girders.

"I never did like him," Megan said indifferently, glancing toward Nightwielder's corpse. "You just did me a favor. Plausible deniability and all of that."

I looked into her eyes. I knew those eyes. I *did*. I didn't understand how it was happening, but it was her.

Never did like him …

"Calamity," I whispered. "*You're* Firefight, aren't you? You always were."

She said nothing, though her eyes flickered down toward my weapons—the rifle still held at my hip, the handgun in my other hand. Her eye twitched.

"Firefight wasn't male," I said. "He … she was a woman." I felt my eyes go wide. "That day in the elevator shaft, when the guards almost caught us … they didn't see anything in the shaft. You made an illusion."

She was still staring at my guns.

"And then, when we were on the cycles," I said. "You created an illusion of Abraham riding with us to distract the people following, to keep them from seeing the real him flee to safety. That's what I saw behind us after he split off."

Why was she looking at my guns?

“But the dowser,” I said. “It tested you, and it said you weren’t an Epic. No … wait. Illusions. You could just make it display anything you wanted. Steelheart must have known the Reckoners were coming to town. He sent you to infiltrate. You were the newest of the Reckoners, before me. You never wanted to attack Steelheart. You said you believed in his rule.”

She licked her lips, then whispered something. She didn’t seem to have been listening to anything I said. “Sparks,” she murmured. “I can’t believe that actually worked.…”

What?

“You checkmated him …,” she whispered. “That was amazing. …”

Checkmated him? Nightwielder? Was that what she talking about? She looked up at me, and I remembered. She was repeating one of our first conversations, following her shooting Fortuity. She’d held a rifle at her hip and a handgun out forward. Just like I had done to gun down Nightwielder. The sight seemed to have triggered something in her.

“David,” she said. “*That’s* your name. And I think you’re very aggravating.” She seemed to only just be recalling who I was. What had happened to her memory?

“Thank you?” I said.

A blast rocked the stadium and she looked over her shoulder. She still had the gun pointed at me.

“Whose side are you on, Megan?” I asked.

“My own,” she said immediately, but then she held her other hand to her head, seeming uncertain.

“Someone betrayed us to Steelheart,” I said. “Someone warned him we were going to hit Conflux, and someone told him we were hacking the city cameras. Today someone’s been listening in on us, reporting to him what we’ve been doing. It was you.”

She looked back at me, and didn’t deny it.

“But you also used your illusions to save Abraham,” I said. “And you killed Fortuity. I can buy that Steelheart wanted us to trust you, so he let you kill off one of his lesser Epics. Fortuity was out of favor anyway. But why would you betray us, *then* help Abraham escape?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I …”

“Are you going to shoot me?” I asked, looking down the barrel of her gun.

She hesitated. “Idiot. You really don’t know how to talk to women, do you, Knees?” She cocked her head as if surprised the words had come out.

She lowered the gun, then turned and ran off.

I’ve got to follow her, I thought, taking a step forward. Another explosion sounded outside.

No. I ripped my eyes away from her fleeing form. *I’ve got to get outside and help*.

I dashed past Nightwielder’s corpse—still half submerged in steel, frozen, blood seeping down his chest—and headed for the nearest exit out onto the playing field.

Or in this case, the battlefield.

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"… find that idiot boy and shoot him for me, Cody!" Prof screamed into my ear as I unmuted my mobile.

"We're pulling out, Jon," Tia said, talking over him. "I'm on my way in the copter. Three minutes until I arrive. Abraham will blow the cover explosion."

"Abraham can go to hell," Prof spat. "I'm seeing this to the end."

"You *can't* fight a High Epic, Jon," Tia said.

"I'll do whatever I want! I'm—" His voice cut out.

"I've removed him from the feed," Tia said to the rest of us. "This is bad. I've never heard him go this far. We need to pull him out somehow or we'll lose him."

"Lose him?" Cody asked, sounding confused. I could hear gunfire through the line near him, and could hear the same gunfire up ahead echoing in the wide corridor. I kept running.

"I'll explain later," Tia said in the type of voice that really meant "I'll find a better way to dodge that question later."

There, I thought, catching a bit of light up ahead. It was dark outside, but not as pitch-black as it was in the tunnellike confines of the stadium's innards. The gunfire was louder.

"I'm pulling us out," Tia continued. "Abraham, I need you to blow that explosion in the ground when I say. Cody … have you found David yet? Be warned, Nightwielder might be on your back."

She thinks I'm dead, I thought, *because I haven't been answering*. "I'm here," I said.

"David," Tia said, sounding relieved. "What is your status?"

“Nightwielder is down,” I said, reaching the tunnel out onto the field, one of the ones that the teams had used when running out to play. “The UV worked. I think Firefight is gone too. I … drove him off.”

“What? How?”

“Um … I’ll explain later.”

“Fair enough,” Tia said. “We have about two minutes until I extract. Get to Cody.”

I didn’t reply—I was taking in the field. *Battlefield is right*, I thought, stunned. The bodies of Enforcement soldiers lay scattered like discarded trash. Fires burned in several locations, sending smoke twisting up into the dark sky. Red flares blazed across the field, thrown by soldiers to get better light. Chunks had been blown out of the seating and the ground, and blackened scars marred the once-silver steel.

“You guys have been fighting a war,” I whispered. Then I caught sight of Steelheart.

He strode across the field, lips parted and teeth clenched in a sneer. His glowing hand was forward, and he blasted shot after shot toward something in front of him. Prof, running behind one of the team benches. Blast after blast nearly hit him, but he ducked and dodged between them, incredibly nimble. He pushed through a wall in the side of the stadium, his tensors vaporizing an opening for him.

Steelheart bellowed in aggravation, firing blasts into the hole. Prof appeared a moment later, breaking out of another wall, steel dust pouring down around him. He whipped his hand forward, throwing a series of crude daggers toward Steelheart; they had likely been cut from the steel itself. They just bounced off the High Epic.

Prof looked frustrated, as if he were annoyed he couldn’t hurt Steelheart. For my part, I was amazed. “Has he been doing this the whole time?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Cody said. “Like I said, man’s a machine.”

I scanned the field to my right and picked out Cody behind some rubble. He was leaning forward on his rifle and tracking a group of Enforcement soldiers in the first-level seats. They had set up a large machine gun behind some blast shields, and Cody looked pinned down, which explained why he hadn’t been able to come find me. I stuffed my handgun into its holster and

unwrapped the flashlight from the stock of my rifle.

"I'm almost there, gentlemen," Tia said. "No more attempts to kill Steelheart. All phases aborted. We need to take this chance and leave while we can."

"I don't think Prof is going to go," Abraham said.

"I'll deal with Prof," Tia said.

"Fine," Abraham answered. "Where are you going to—"

"Guys," I cut in. "Be careful what you say in the general link. I think our lines may be hacked."

"Impossible," Tia said. "Mobile networks are secure."

"Not if you have access to an authorized mobile," I answered. "And Steelheart might have recovered Megan's."

There was silence on the line. "Sparks," Tia said. "I'm an idiot."

"Ah, finally something makes sense," Cody said, firing a shot at the soldiers. "That mobile—"

Something moved in the opening to the building behind Cody. I cursed, raising my rifle—but without the stock it was *very* hard to aim properly. I pulled the trigger as an armed Enforcement soldier leaped out. I missed. He fired a staccato burst.

There was no sound from Cody, but I could see the blood spray. *No, no, NO!* I thought, taking off at a run. I fired again, this time clipping the soldier on the shoulder. It didn't get past his armor, but he turned from Cody, sighting on me.

He fired. I raised my left hand, the one with the tensor. I did it almost by instinct. It was tougher to make the song this time, and I didn't know why.

But I made it work. I let the song out.

I felt something thump against my palm, and a puff of steel dust sprayed off my hand. It smarted something incredible, and the tensor started sparking. A moment later a series of gunshots sounded, and the soldier dropped. Abraham came around the corner behind the man.

Gunfire from above. I dashed and skidded against the ground, sliding behind Cody's cover. He was there, gasping, eyes wide. He'd been hit several times, three in the leg, one in the gut.

"Cover us," Abraham said in his calm voice, whipping out a bandage. He tied it around Cody's leg. "Tia, Cody is hit badly."

"I'm here," Tia said. In the chaos I hadn't noticed the sounds of the copter. "I've created new mobile channels using a direct feed to each of you; that's what we should have done the moment

Megan lost her mobile. Abraham, we *need* to extract. Now."

I peeked up over the rubble. Soldiers were climbing down from the stands to move on us. Abraham casually pulled a grenade off his belt and tossed it into the hallway behind us in case someone was trying to sneak up again. It exploded, and I heard shouts.

I swapped my rifle for Cody's, then opened fire on those advancing soldiers. Some went for cover, but others continued moving, bold. They knew we were at the end of our resources. I kept firing but was rewarded with a series of clicks. Cody had been almost out of ammo.

"Here," Abraham said, dropping his large assault rifle beside me. "Tia, where are you?"

"Near your position," she said. "Just outside the stadium. Head straight back and out."

"I'm bringing Cody," Abraham said.

Cody was still conscious, though he was mostly just cursing at the moment, with his eyes squeezed shut. I nodded to Abraham. I'd cover their retreat. I took up Abraham's assault rifle. To be honest, I'd always wanted to fire the thing.

It was a very satisfying weapon to use. The recoil was soft, and the weapon felt lighter than it should have. I set it on the small front tripod and let loose on fully automatic, dozens of rounds ripping through the soldiers trying to get to us. Abraham carried Cody out the back way.

Prof and Steelheart were still fighting. I downed another soldier, Abraham's high-caliber rounds ignoring most of the soldier's armor. As I fired I could feel the handgun under my arm pressing against my side.

We'd never tried firing that, the last of our guesses at how to beat Steelheart. There was no way I could hit Steelheart at this range, though. And Tia had decided to pull us out before we tried it, calling the operation.

I gunned down another soldier. The stadium trembled as Steelheart fired a series of blasts at Prof. *I can't extract now*, I thought, *despite what Tia said—I've got to try the gun*.

"We're in the copter," Abraham said in my ear. "David, time to move."

"I still haven't tried phase four," I said, climbing up to a kneeling position and firing on the soldiers again. One tossed a grenade my direction, but I was already pulling back into the

corridor. “And Prof is still out there.”

“We’re aborting,” Tia said. “Retreat. Prof will escape using the tensors.”

“He’ll never stay ahead of Steelheart,” I said. “Besides, do you really want to run without trying this?” I ran my finger along the gun in its holster.

Tia was silent.

“I’m going for it,” I said. “If you take heat, pull out.” I ran off the field and back into the hallways beneath the stands, holding Abraham’s assault rifle and listening to soldiers shout behind me. *Steelheart and Prof were moving this direction*, I thought. *I just need to wrap around and get close enough to fire on him. I can do it from behind.*

It would work. It *had* to work.

Those soldiers were following me. Abraham’s gun had a grenade launcher underneath. Any ammunition? Those were meant to be fired before exploding, but I could use my remote detonator pen and an eraser tab to make one go off.

No luck. The gun was out of grenades. I cursed, but then saw the remote fire switch on the gun. I grinned, then stopped, spun, and put the gun on the ground, wedged back against a chunk of steel. I flipped the switch and ran.

It started firing like crazy, spraying the corridor behind me with bullets. It probably wouldn’t do much damage, but all I needed was a short breather. I heard soldiers yelling at one another to take cover.

That would do. I reached another opening and left the hallway, dashing out onto the playing field.

Smoke curled in patches from the ground. Steelheart’s blasts seemed to smolder after they hit, starting fires on things that shouldn’t burn. I raised the pistol, and in a fleeting moment I wondered what Abraham would say when he learned that I’d lost his gun. Again.

I spotted Steelheart, who was turned away from me, distracted by Prof. I ran for all I was worth, passing through clouds of smoke, leaping over rubble.

Steelheart started to turn as I approached. I could see his eyes, imperious and arrogant. His hands seemed to burn with energy. I pulled to a halt in the whipping smoke, arms shaking as I raised the gun. The gun that had killed my father. The only weapon that

had ever wounded this monster in front of me.

I fired three shots.

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EACH one hit … and each one bounced free of Steelheart, like pebbles thrown at a tank.

I lowered the gun. Steelheart raised a hand toward me, energy glowing around his palm, but I didn't care.

That's it, I thought. *We've tried everything*. I didn't know his secret. I never had.

I had failed.

He released a blast of energy, and some primal part of me wouldn't just stand there. I threw myself to the side, and the blast hit the ground beside me, spraying up a shower of molten metal. The ground shook and the blast threw my roll out of control. I tumbled hard on the unyielding ground.

I came to a stop and lay there, dazed. Steelheart stepped forward. His cape had been torn in places from Prof's attacks, but he didn't seem to be anything more than inconvenienced. He loomed above me, hand forward.

He was majestic. I could recognize that, even as I readied myself for death at his hands. Silver and black cape flapping, the rips making it look more *real* somehow. Classically square face, a jaw that any linebacker would have envied, a body that was toned and muscled—but not in the way of a bodybuilder. This wasn't exaggeration; it was perfection.

He studied me, his hand glowing. "Ah yes," he said. "The child in the bank."

I blinked, shocked.

"I remember everyone and everything," he said to me. "You needn't be surprised. I am divine, child. I do not forget. I thought

you well and dead. A loose end. I *hate* loose ends."

"You killed my father," I whispered. A stupid thing to say, but it was what came out.

"I've killed a lot of fathers," Steelheart said. "And mothers, sons, daughters. It is my right."

The glow of his hand grew brighter. I braced myself for what was coming.

Prof tackled Steelheart from behind.

I rolled to the side by reflex as the two hit the ground nearby. Prof came up on top. His clothing was burned, ripped, and bloodied. He had his sword, and began slamming it down in Steelheart's face.

Steelheart laughed as the weapon hit; his face actually *dented* the sword.

He was talking to me to draw Prof out, I realized in a daze. *He …*

Steelheart reached up and shoved Prof, throwing him backward. What seemed like a tiny bit of effort from Steelheart tossed Prof a good ten feet. He hit and grunted.

The winds picked up, and Steelheart floated up to a standing position. Then he leaped, soaring into the air. He came down on one knee, slamming a fist into Prof's face.

Red blood splashed out around him.

I screamed, scrambling to my feet and running for Prof. My ankle wasn't working properly though, and I fell hard, hitting the ground. Through tears of pain, I saw Steelheart punch down again.

Red. So much red.

The High Epic stood up, shaking his bloodied hand. "You have a distinction, little Epic," he said to the fallen Prof. "I believe you agitated me more than any before you."

I crawled forward, reaching Prof's side. His skull was crushed in on the left, his eyes bulging out the front, staring sightlessly. Dead.

"David!" Tia said in my ear. There was gunfire on her side of the line. Enforcement had found the copter.

"Go," I whispered.

"But—"

"Prof is dead," I said. "I am too. Go."

Silence.

From my pocket, I took the detonator pen. We were in the

middle of the field. Cody had placed my blasting cap on the dump of explosives, and it was just beneath us. Well, I'd blow Steelheart into the sky, for what good it would do.

Several Enforcement soldiers rushed up to Steelheart, reporting on the perimeter. I heard the copter thumping as it ascended to leave. I also heard Tia weeping on the line.

I pulled myself up to a kneeling position beside Prof's corpse.

My father dying before me. Kneeling at his side. Go … run …

At least this time I hadn't been a coward. I raised the pen, fingering the button on the top. The blast would kill me, but it wouldn't harm Steelheart. He'd survived explosions before. I might take a few soldiers with me, though. That was worth it.

"No," Steelheart said to his troops. "I'll deal with him. This one is … special."

I looked over at him, blinking dazed eyes. He'd raised his arm to ward away the Enforcement officers.

There was something strange in the distance behind him, over the stadium rim, above the luxury suites. I frowned. Light? But … that wasn't the right direction. I wasn't facing the city. Besides, the city had never produced a light that grand. Reds, oranges, yellows. The very sky seemed on fire.

I blinked through the haze of smoke. Sunlight. Nightwielder was dead. The *sun* was rising.

Steelheart spun about. Then he stumbled back, raising an arm against the light. His mouth opened in awe; then he shut it, grinding his teeth.

He turned back on me, eyes wide with anger. "Nightwielder will be difficult to replace," he growled.

Kneeling in the middle of the field, I stared at the light. That beautiful glow, that powerful *something* beyond.

There are *things greater than the Epics*, I thought. *There is life, and love, and nature herself*.

Steelheart strode toward me.

Where there are villains, there will be heroes. My father's voice. *Just wait. They* will *come*.

Steelheart raised a glowing hand.

Sometimes, son, you have to help the heroes along.…

And suddenly, I knew.

An awareness opened my mind, like the burning radiance of the sun itself. I knew. I understood.

Not looking down, I gathered up my father's gun. I fiddled with it a moment, then raised it directly at Steelheart.

Steelheart sniffed and stared it down. "Well?"

My hand quivered, wavering, my arm trembling. The sun backlit Steelheart.

"Idiot," Steelheart said, and reached forward, grabbing my hand and crushing the bones. I barely felt the pain. The gun dropped to the ground with a clank. Steelheart held out a hand and the air spun around on the ground, forming a little whirlwind underneath the gun that raised it into his fingers. He turned it on me.

I looked up at him. A murderer outlined in brilliant light. Seen like that, he was just a shadow. Darkness. A nothingness before *real* power.

The men in this world, Epics included, would pass from time. I might be a worm to him, but he was a worm himself in the grand scheme of the universe.

His cheek bore a tiny sliver of a scar. The only imperfection on his body. A gift from a man who had believed in him. A gift from a better man than Steelheart would ever be, or ever understand.

"I should have been more careful that day," Steelheart said.

"My father didn't fear you," I whispered.

Steelheart stiffened, gun pointed to my head as I knelt, bloodied, before him. He always liked to use his enemy's own weapon against him. That was part of the pattern. The wind stirred the smoke rising around us.

"That's the secret," I said. "You keep us in darkness. You show off your terrible powers. You kill, you allow the Epics to kill, you turn men's own weapons against them. You even spread false rumors about how horrible you are, as if you can't be bothered to be as evil as you want to be. You want us to be afraid …"

Steelheart's eyes widened.

"… because you can only be hurt by someone who doesn't fear you," I said. "But such a person doesn't really exist, do they? You make sure of it. Even the Reckoners, even Prof himself. Even me. We are all afraid of you. Fortunately I know someone who isn't afraid of you, and never has been."

"You know nothing," he growled.

"I know everything," I whispered. Then I smiled.

Steelheart pulled the trigger.

Inside the gun, the hammer struck the back of the bullet's casing. Gunpowder exploded, and the bullet sprang forward, summoned to kill.

In the barrel, it struck the thing I had lodged there. A slender pen, with a button you can click on the top. It was just small enough to fit into the gun. A detonator. Connected to explosives beneath our feet.

The bullet hit the trigger and pushed it in.

I swore I could watch the explosion unfold. Each beat of my heart seemed to take an eternity. Fire channeled upward, steel ground ripping apart like paper. Terrible redness to match the peaceful beauty of the sunrise.

The fire consumed Steelheart and all around him; it ripped his body apart as he opened his mouth to scream. Skin flayed, muscles burned, organs shredded. He turned eyes toward the heavens, consumed by a volcano of fire and fury that opened at his feet. In that fraction of a sliver of a moment, Steelheart—greatest of all Epics—died.

He could only be killed by someone who didn't fear him.

He had pulled the trigger himself.

He had caused the detonation himself.

And as that arrogant, self-confident sneer implied, Steelheart did *not* fear himself. He was, perhaps, the only person alive who did not.

I didn't really have time to smile in that frozen moment, but I was feeling it nonetheless as the fire came for me.

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I watched the shifting pattern of red, orange, and black. A wall of fire and destruction. I watched it until it vanished. It left a black scar on the ground in front of me, surrounding a hole five paces wide—the blast crater of the explosion.

I watched it all, and found myself still alive. I'll admit, it was the most baffling moment in my life.

Someone groaned behind me. I spun to see Prof sitting up. His clothing was covered in blood and he had a few scratches on his skin, but his skull was whole. Had I mistaken the extent of his injuries?

Prof had his hand forward, palm out. The tensor he'd been wearing was in tatters. "Sparks," he said. "Another inch or so and I wouldn't have been able to stop it." He coughed into his fist. "You're a lucky little slontze."

Even as he spoke, the scratches on his skin pulled together, healing. *Prof's an Epic*, I thought. *Prof's an* Epic. *That was an energy shield he created to block the explosion!*

He stumbled to his feet, looking around the stadium. A few Enforcement soldiers were running away, fleeing as they saw him rise. They seemed to want no part of whatever was happening in the center of the field.

"How …," I said. "How long?"

"Since Calamity," Prof said, cracking his neck. "You think an ordinary person could have stood against Steelheart as long as I did tonight?"

Of course not. "The inventions are all fakes, aren't they?" I said, realization dawning. "You're a gifter! You *gave* us your

abilities. Shielding abilities in the form of jackets, healing ability in the form of the harmsway, and destructive powers in the form of the tensors."

"Don't know why I did it," Prof said. "You pathetic little …"

He groaned, raising his hand to his head, then gritted his teeth and roared.

I scrambled back, startled.

"It's so hard to fight," he said through clenched teeth. "The more you use it, the … Arrrrr!" He knelt down, holding his head. He was quiet for a few minutes, and I let him be, not knowing what to say. When he raised his head, he seemed more in control. "I give it away," he said, "because if I use it … it does this to me."

"You can fight it, Prof," I said. It felt right. "I've seen you do it. You're a good man. Don't let it consume you."

He nodded, breathing in and out deeply. "Take it." He reached out his hand.

I hesitantly took his hand with my good one—the other was crushed. I should have felt pain from that. I was too much in shock.

I didn't feel any different, but Prof seemed to grow more in control. My wounded hand re-formed, bones pulling together. In seconds I could flex it again, and it worked perfectly.

"I have to split it up among you," he said. "It doesn't seem to … seep into you as quickly as it does me. But if I give it all to one person, they'll change."

"That's why Megan couldn't use the tensors," I said. "Or the harmsway."

"What?"

"Oh, sorry. You don't know. Megan's an Epic too."

"What?"

"She's Firefight," I said, cringing back a bit. "She used her illusion powers to fool the dowser. Wait, the dowser—"

"Tia and I programmed it to exclude me," Prof said. "It gives a false negative on me."

"Oh. Well, I think Steelheart must have sent Megan to infiltrate the Reckoners. But Edmund said that he couldn't gift his powers to other Epics, so … yeah. That's why she couldn't ever use the tensors."

Prof shook his head. "When he said that, in the hideout, it made me wonder. I'd never tried to give mine to another Epic. I

should have seen … Megan …"

"You couldn't have known," I said.

Prof breathed in and out, then nodded. He looked at me. "It's okay, son. You don't need to be afraid. It's passing quickly this time."

He hesitated. "I think."

"Good enough for me," I said, climbing to my feet.

The air smelled of explosives—of gunpowder, smoke, and burned flesh. The growing sunlight was reflecting off the steel surfaces around us. I found it almost blinding, and the sun wasn't even fully up yet.

Prof looked at the sunlight as if he hadn't noticed it before. He actually smiled, and seemed more and more like his old self. He strode out across the field, walking toward something in the rubble.

Megan's personality changed when she used her powers too, I thought. *In the elevator shaft, on the cycle … she changed. Became brasher, more arrogant, even more hateful*. It had passed quickly each time, but she'd barely used her powers, so maybe the effects on her had been weaker.

If that was true, then spending time with the Reckoners—when she needed to be careful not to use her abilities lest she give herself away—had served to keep her from being affected. The people she was meant to have infiltrated had instead turned her more human.

Prof came walking back with something in his hand. A skull, blackened and charred. Metal glinted through the soot. A steel skull. He turned it toward me. There was a groove in the right cheekbone, like the trail left by a bullet.

"Huh," I said, taking the skull. "If the bullet could hurt his bones, why couldn't the blast?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if his death triggered his tranfersion abilities," Prof said. "Turning what was left of him as he died—his bones, or some of them—into steel."

Seemed like a stretch to me. But then, strange things happened around Epics. There were oddities, especially when they died.

As I regarded the skull, Prof called Tia. I distractedly caught the sounds of weeping, exclamations of joy, and an exchange that ended with her turning the copter back for us. I looked up, then found myself walking toward the tunnel entrance into the

stadium innards.

"David?" Prof called.

"I'll be right back," I said. "I want to get something."

"The copter will be here in a few minutes. I suggest we *not* be here when Enforcement comes in earnest to see what happened."

I started running, but he didn't object further. As I entered the darkness, I turned my mobile's light up to full, illuminating the tall, cavernous corridors. I ran past Nightwielder's body suspended in steel. Past the place where Abraham had detonated the explosion.

I slowed, peeking into concession stands and restrooms. I didn't have long to look, and I soon felt like a fool. What did I expect to find? She'd left. She was …

Voices.

I froze, then turned about in the dim corridor. There. I walked forward, eventually finding a steel door frozen open and leading into what appeared to be a janitorial chamber. I could almost make out the voice. It was familiar. Not Megan's voice, but …

"… deserved to live through this, even if I didn't," the voice said. Gunfire followed, sounding distant. "You know, I think I fell for you that first day. Stupid, huh? Love at first sight. What a cliché."

Yes, I knew that voice. It was mine. I stopped at the doorway, feeling like I was in a dream as I listened to my own words. Words spoken as I defended Megan's dying body. I continued listening as the entire scene played out. Right up until the end. "I don't know if I love you," my voice said. "But whatever the emotion is, it's the strongest one I've felt in years. Thank you."

The recording stopped. Then it started playing again from the beginning.

I stepped into the small room. Megan sat on the floor in the corner, staring at the mobile in her hands. She turned down the volume when I entered, but she didn't stop looking at the screen.

"I keep a secret video and audio feed," she whispered. "The camera's embedded in my skin, above my eye. It starts up if I close my eyes for too long, or if my heart rate goes too high or too low. It sends the data to one of my caches in the city. I started doing that after I died the first few times. It's always disorienting to reincarnate. It helps if I can watch what happened leading up to my death."

“Megan, I …” What could I say?

“Megan is my real name,” she said. “Isn’t that funny? I felt I could give it to the Reckoners because that person, the person I was, is dead. Megan Tarash. She’s never had any connection to Firefight. She was just another ordinary human.”

She looked up at me, and in the light of her mobile screen I could see tears in her eyes. “You carried me all that way,” she whispered. “I watched it, when I was first reborn this time. Your actions didn’t make sense to me. I thought you must have needed something from me. Now I see something different in what you did.”

“We’ve got to go, Megan,” I said, stepping forward. “Prof can explain better than I can. But right now, just come with me.”

“My mind *changes*,” she whispered. “When I die, I am reborn out of light a day later. Somewhere random, not where my body was, not where I died, but nearby. Different each time. I … I don’t feel like myself, now that that’s happened. Not the self I want to be. It doesn’t make sense. What do you trust, David? What do you trust when your own thoughts and emotions seem to hate you?”

“Prof can—”

“Stop,” she said, raising a hand. “Don’t … don’t come closer. Just leave me. I need to think.”

I stepped forward.

“Stop!” The walls faded, and fires seemed to flame up around us. The floor warped beneath me, making me nauseous. I stumbled.

“You’ve *got* to come with me, Megan.”

“Take another step and I’ll shoot myself,” she said, reaching for a gun on the floor beside her. “I’ll do it, David. Death is nothing to me. Not anymore.”

I backed away, hands up.

“I need to think about this,” she mumbled again, looking back at her mobile.

“David.” A voice in my ear. Prof’s voice. “David, we’re leaving *now*.”

“Don’t use your powers, Megan,” I said to her. “Please. You *have* to understand. They’re what change you. Don’t use them for a few days. Hide, and your mind will get clearer.”

She kept staring at the screen. The recording started over.

“Megan …”

She raised the gun toward me without shifting her gaze. The tears dripped down her cheeks.

“David!” Prof yelled.

I turned and ran for the copter. I didn’t know what else to do.

Epilogue

I'VE seen Steelheart bleed.

I've seen him scream. I've seen him burn. I've seen him die in an inferno, and I was the one who killed him. Yes, the hand that pushed the detonator was his own, but I don't care—and have never cared—which hand actually took his life. I made it happen. I've got his skull to prove it.

I sat strapped in the copter's chair, looking out the open door to the side, my hair blowing as we lifted off. Cody was stabilizing quickly in the back seat, much to Abraham's amazement. I knew Prof had given the man a large portion of his healing power. From what I knew of Epic regeneration abilities, that would be able to heal Cody from practically anything, so long as he was still breathing when the power was transferred.

We soared up into the air before a blazing yellow sun, leaving the stadium scorched, burned, blasted, but with the scent of triumph. My father told me that Soldier Field had been named in honor of the military men and women who had fallen in battle. Now it had hosted the most important battle since Calamity. The field's name had never seemed more appropriate to me.

We rose above a city that was seeing real light for the first time in a decade. People were in the streets, looking upward.

Tia piloted the copter, one hand reaching over to hold Prof's arm, as if she were unable to believe he was really there with us. He looked out his window, and I wondered if he saw what I did. We hadn't rescued this city. Not yet. We'd killed Steelheart, but other Epics would come.

I didn't accept that we just had to abandon the people now.

We'd removed Newcago's source of authority; we'd have to take responsibility for that. I wouldn't abandon my home to chaos, not now, not even for the Reckoners.

Fighting back had to be about more than just killing Epics. It had to be about something greater. Something, perhaps, that had to do with Prof and Megan.

The Epics *can* be beaten. Some, maybe, can even be rescued. I don't know how to manage it exactly. But I intend to keep trying until either we find an answer or I'm dead.

I smiled as we turned out of the city. *The heroes will come … we might just have to help them along.*

I always assumed that my father's death would be the most transformative event of my life. Only now, with Steelheart's skull in my hand, did I realize that I hadn't been fighting for vengeance, and hadn't been fighting for redemption. I hadn't been fighting because of my father's death.

I fought because of his dreams.

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Brandon Sanderson

The battle for mankind continues in

FIREFIGHT

Fall 2014

BRANDON SANDERSON is the author of the internationally bestselling Mistborn trilogy, and he was chosen to complete Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time series. His books have been published in more than twenty-five languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. He lives and writes in Utah. To learn more about Brandon and his books, visit him at brandonsanderson.com.

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF STEELHEART

BRANDON SANDERSON

MITOSIS

A RECKONERS STORY

BRANDON SANDERSON

MITOSIS

A RECKONERS STORY

ALSO BY BRANDON SANDERSON

Steelheart

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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1

The day had finally arrived, a day I'd been awaiting for ten years. A glorious day, a momentous day, a day of import and distinction.

It was time to buy a hot dog.

Someone was in line when we arrived, but I didn't cut in front of her. She would have let me. I was one of the Reckoners—leaders of the rebellion, defenders of the city of Newcago, slayers of Steelheart himself. But standing in line was part of the experience, and I didn't want to skip a moment.

Newcago extended around me, a city of skyscrapers, underpasses, shops, and streets all frozen permanently in steel. Recently, Tia had started an initiative to paint some of those surfaces. Now that the city's perpetual gloom had been dispelled, it turned out all those reflective surfaces could make things *really* bright. With some work, instead of looking the same everywhere, the city would eventually become a patchwork of reds, oranges, greens, whites, and purples.

Abraham—my companion for this hot dog excursion—followed my gaze, then grimaced. "It would be nice if when we painted a wall, we would take a little more concern for colors that matched those of their neighbors."

Tall and dark-skinned, Abraham spoke with a light French accent. As he talked, he scanned the people walking nearby, studying each one in his trademark relaxed yet discerning way. The butt of a handgun poked from his hip holster. We Reckoners weren't *technically* police. I wasn't sure what we were. But whatever it was, it involved weapons, and I had my rifle over my shoulder. Newcago was almost kind of peaceful, now that we'd dealt with the rioters, but you couldn't count on peace lasting long. Not with Epics out there.

"We have to use the paint we can find," I said.

"It's garish."

I shrugged. "I like it. The colors are different. Not like the city was before Calamity, but also a big change from how it was under Steelheart. They make the city look like a big … chessboard. Um, one painted a lot of colors."

"Or perhaps a quilt?" Abraham asked, sounding amused.

"Sure, I suppose. If you want to use a boring metaphor."

A quilt. Why hadn't I thought of that?

The woman in front of us wandered off with her hot dog, and I

stepped up to the stand—a small metal cart with a transformed steel umbrella permanently frozen open. The vendor, Sam, was an elderly, bearded man who wore a small red-and-white hat. He grinned at us. "For you, half price," he said, whipping up two hot dogs. Chicago style, of course.

"Half price?" Abraham said. "Saving the world does not inspire the gratitude it once did."

"A man has to make a living," Sam said, slathering on the condiments. Like … a lot of them.

Yellow mustard, onions, chunked tomatoes, sweet pickle relish, peppers—whole, of course, and pickled—a dill pickle slice, and a pinch of celery salt. Just like I remembered. A true Chicago dog looks like someone fired a bazooka at a vegetable stand, then scraped the remnants off the wall and slathered it on a tube of meat.

I took mine greedily. Abraham was more skeptical.

"Ketchup?" Abraham asked.

The vendor's eyes opened wide.

"He's not from around here," I said quickly. "No ketchup, Abraham. Aren't you French? You people are supposed to have good taste in food."

"French *Canadians* do have good taste in food," Abraham said, inspecting the hot dog. "But I am not convinced that this is actually food."

"Just try it." I bit into my dog.

Bliss.

For a moment, it was as if no time had passed. I was back with my father, before everything went bad. I could hear him laughing, could smell the city as it had been back then—rank at times, yes, but also *alive*. Full of people talking and laughing and yelling. Asphalt streets, hot in the summer as we walked together. People in hockey jerseys. The Blackhawks had just won the Cup.… It faded around me, and I was back in Newcago, a steel city. But that moment of tasting it all again … sparks, that was wonderful. I looked up at Sam, and he grinned at me. We couldn't recapture it all. The world was a different place now.

But damn it, we *could* have proper hot dogs again.

I turned to look around the city. Nobody else had gotten in line, and people passed with eyes cast down. We were at First Union Square, a holy place where a certain bank had once stood. It was also the center of the new city's crossroads. It was a busy location, a prime spot for a hot dog vendor.

I set my jaw, then slapped some coins down on Sam's cart. "Free hot dogs for the first ten who want them!" I shouted.

People looked at us, but nobody came over. When some of them

saw me watching, they lowered their eyes and continued on.

Sam sighed, crossing his arms on top of his cart. “Sorry, Steelslayer. They’re too afraid.”

“Afraid of hot dogs?” I said.

“Afraid to get comfortable with freedom,” Sam said, watching a woman rush past and head into the understreets, where most people still lived. Even with sunlight up here now, and no Epics to torment them … even with painted walls and colors … they still hid below.

“They think the Epics will return,” Abraham said with a nod. “They are waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak.”

“They’ll change,” I said, stubbornly stuffing more of my hot dog into my mouth. I talked around the bite. “They’ll see.”

That was what this had all been about, right? Killing Steelheart? It had been to show that we *could* fight back. Everyone else would understand, eventually. They had to. The Reckoners couldn’t fight every Epic in the country on our own.

I nodded to Sam. “Thanks. For what you do.”

He nodded. It might seem silly, but Sam opening his hot dog stand was one of the most important events this city had seen in ten years. Some of us fought back with guns and assassinations. Others fought back with a little hot dog stand on the corner.

“We’ll see,” Sam said, pushing away the coins I’d set down, all but two nickels to pay for our hot dogs. We’d gone back to using American money, though only the coins, and we valued them much higher. The city government backed them with food stores, at Tia’s suggestion.

“Keep it all,” I said. “Give free hot dogs to the first ten who come today. We’ll change them, Sam. One bite at a time.”

He smiled, but pocketed the money. As Abraham and I walked off, Tia’s voice, terse and distracted, came in over my earpiece. “Do you two have a report?”

“The dogs are awesome,” I said.

“Dogs?” she said. “Watchdogs? You’ve been checking on the city kennels?”

“Young David,” Abraham said around a mouthful, “has been instructing me on the local cuisine. They *are* called ‘hot dogs’ because they’re only good for feeding to animals, yes?”

“You took him to that *hot dog* stand?” Tia asked. “Weren’t you two supposed to be doing greetings?”

“Philistines, both of you,” I said, cramming the rest of my hot dog into my mouth.

“We are on our way, Tia,” Abraham said.

Abraham and I hiked toward the city gates. The new city government had decided to section off the downtown, and had done

so by creating barricades out of steel furniture to block some of the streets. It created a decent perimeter of control that helped us keep tabs on who was entering our city.

We passed people scuttling about on their business, heads down. Sam was right. Most of the population seemed to think the Epics were going to descend upon the city any moment, exacting retribution. In fact, after we'd overthrown Steelheart, a shocking number of people had *left* the city.

That was unfortunate, as we now had a provisional government in place. We had farmers to work the fields outside, and Edmund using his Epic abilities to provide free power for the whole place. We even had a large number of former members of Steelheart's Enforcement troops recruited to police the city.

Newcago was working as well now as it had under Steelheart. We'd tried to replicate his organization, only without that whole "indiscriminate murder of innocents" thing. Life was good here. Better than anything else in the remnants of the Fractured States, for certain.

Still, people hid, waited for a disaster. "They *will* see," I muttered.

"Perhaps," Abraham said, eyeing me.

"Just wait."

He shrugged and chewed his last bit of hot dog. He grimaced. "I do not think I can forgive you for that, David. It was terrible. Tastes should complement one another, not hold all-out war with one another."

"You finished it."

"I did not wish to be impolite." He grimaced again. "Truly awful."

We walked in silence until we arrived at the first unbarricaded roadway. Here, members of Enforcement processed a line of people wanting to enter. People with Newcago passports—farmers or scavengers who worked outside of the downtown—went right through. Newcomers, however, were stopped and told to wait for orientation.

"Good crowd today," I noted. Some forty or fifty people waited in the newcomer line. Abraham grunted. The two of us walked up to where a man in black Enforcement armor was explaining the city rules to a group in worn, dirty clothing. Most of these people would have spent the last years outside of civilization, dodging Epics, surviving as best they could in a land ruled by nested levels of tyrants, like Russian dolls with evil little faces painted on them.

Two families among the newcomers, I thought, noting the men and women with children. That encouraged me.

As several of the soldiers continued orientation, one of them—Roy—strolled over to me. Like the other soldiers, he wore black armor but no helmet. Enforcement members were intimidating enough without

covering their faces.

"Hey," Roy said. He was a lanky redhead I'd grown up with. I still hadn't figured out whether he bore a grudge for that time I'd shot him in the leg.

"How's this batch?" I asked softly.

"Better than yesterday," Roy said with a grunt. "Fewer opportunists, more genuine immigrants. You can tell the difference when you explain the jobs we need done."

"The opportunists refuse the work?"

"No," Roy said. "They're just too excited, all smiles and eagerness. It's a sham. They plan to get put onto a work detail, then ditch it first chance to see what they can steal. We'll weed them out."

"Be careful," I said. "Don't blacklist someone just because they're optimistic."

Roy shrugged. Enforcement was on our side—we controlled the power that ran their weapons and armor—but they too seemed on edge. Steelheart had occasionally used them to fight lesser Epics. From what I'd heard, it hadn't gone well for the ordinary humans on either side of such a conflict.

These men knew firsthand what it was like to face down Epics. If a powerful one decided to step into Steelheart's place, the police force would be worth less than a bagful of snakes at a dance competition.

I gave Roy an encouraging slap on the shoulder. The officers finished their orientation, and I joined Abraham, who began introducing himself to the newcomers one at a time. We'd figured out that after Enforcement's cheerful welcome of stern gazes, strict rules, and suspicious glances, a little friendly chatting with someone more normal went a long way.

I welcomed one of the families, telling them how wonderful Newcago was and how glad I was they'd come. I didn't tell them specifically who I was, though I implied that I was a liaison between the city's people and the Reckoners. I had the speech down pat by now.

As we talked, I saw someone pass to the side.

That hair. That figure.

I turned immediately, stuttering the last words of my greeting. My heart thundered inside my chest. But it wasn't her.

Of course it wasn't her. *You're a fool, David Charleston*, I told myself, turning back to my duties. How long was I going to keep jumping every time I spotted someone who looked vaguely like Megan?

The answer seemed simple. I'd keep doing it until I found her.

This group took well to my introduction, relaxing visibly. A few even asked me questions.

Turned out that the family in my group had fled Newcago years

before, deciding that the convenience wasn't worth the tyranny. Now they were willing to give it another go.

I told the group about a few jobs in particular I thought they should consider, then suggested they get mobiles as soon as possible. A lot of our city administration happened through those, and the fact that we had electricity to power them was a highlight of Newcago. I wanted people to stop thinking of themselves as refugees. They belonged to a community now.

Introductions done, I stepped back and let the people enter the city. They started forward, trepidatious, looking at the towering buildings ahead. It seemed Roy had been right. This group was more promising than ones who had come before. We *were* accomplishing something. And …

I frowned.

"Did you talk to that one?" I asked Abraham, nodding to a man toward the rear of the departing group. He wore simple clothing, jeans and a faded T-shirt, and no socks with his sneakers.

Tattoos ringed his forearm, and he wore an earring in one ear. He was muscular, with distinctively knobbed features, and was perhaps in his late thirties. There was something about him.…

"He didn't say much," Abraham said. "Do you know him?"

"No." I narrowed my eyes. "Wait here."

I followed the group, pulling out my mobile and looking at it as I walked, feigning distraction. They continued on as we'd instructed them, making for the offices at First Union Square. Maybe I was jumping at nothing. I usually got a little paranoid when the Professor wasn't in town. He and Cody had supposedly gone out east to check in with another cell of the Reckoners. Babiar or someplace.

Prof been acting weird lately—at least, that was how we phrased it. "Weird" was actually a euphemism for "Prof is secretly an Epic, and he's trying hard not to go evil and kill us all, so sometimes he gets antisocial."

I now knew three Epics. After a lifetime of hating them, of planning how to kill them, I knew *three*. I'd chatted with them, eaten meals with them, fought beside them. I was fond of them. Well, more than fond, in Megan's case.

I checked on the walking group, then glanced at my mobile again. Life was annoyingly complicated now. Back when Steelheart had been around, I had only needed to worry about—Wait.

I stopped, looking back up at the group I was following. *He* wasn't there. The man I'd been tailing.

Sparks! I pulled up against a steel wall, slapping my mobile into its place on the upper-left front of my jacket and unslinging my rifle. Where had the man gone?

Must have ducked into one of the side streets. I edged up to the one we'd just passed and peeked in. A shadow moved down it, away from me. I waited until it moved around the next corner, then followed at a dash. At the corner, I crouched and peeked in the direction the shadow had gone.

The man from before, in the jeans and wearing no socks, stood there looking back and forth.

Then there were *two* of him.

The twin figures pulled away, each heading in a different direction. They wore the same clothing, had the same gait, the same tattoos and jewelry. It was like two shadows that had overlapped had broken apart.

Oh, *sparks*. I pulled back around the corner, muted my mobile so the only sound it made would come through my earpiece, then held it up.

"Tia, Abraham," I whispered. "We have a *big* problem."

2

"Ah," Tia said in my ear, "I've found it."

I nodded. I was trailing one of the copies of the man. He'd already split twice more, sending clones in different directions. I didn't think he'd spotted me yet.

"Mitosis," Tia said, reading from my notes. "Originally named Lawrence Robert—an unusual Epic with, so far as has been identified, a unique power: he can split into an unknown number of copies of himself. You say here he was once a guitarist in an old rock band."

"Yeah," I said. "He still has the same look."

"Is that how you spotted him?" Abraham said in my ear.

"Maybe." I wasn't certain. For the longest time, I'd been sure I could identify an Epic, even when they hadn't manifested any powers. There was something about the way they walked, the way they carried themselves.

That had been before I'd failed to spot not only Megan, but Prof as well.

"You categorize him as a High Epic?" Tia asked.

"Yeah," I said softly, watching a version of Mitosis idle on the street corner, inspecting the people who passed. "I remember some of this. He's going to be tough to kill, guys. If even one of his clones survives, he survives."

"The clones can split as well?" Abraham asked.

"They aren't really clones," Tia said. I heard papers shuffling on her line as she looked through my notes. "They're all versions of him, but there's no 'prime' individual. David, are you sure about this information?"

"Most of my information is partially hearsay," I admitted. "I've tried to be certain where I can, but anything I write should be at least a little suspect."

"Well, it says here that the clones are all connected. If one is killed, the others will know it. They have to recombine to gain one another's memories, though, so that's something. And what's this? The more copies he makes …"

"The dumber they all get," I finished, remembering now. "When he's one individual, he's pretty smart, but each clone he adds brings down the IQ of all of them."

"Sounds like a weakness," Abraham said over the line.

"He also hates music," I said. "Just after becoming an Epic, he went around destroying the music departments of stores. He's known to immediately kill anyone he sees walking around wearing headphones or earbuds."

"Another potential weakness?" Abraham said over the line.

"Yeah," I said, "but even if one of those works, we still have to get each and every copy. That's the big problem. Even if we manage to kill every Mitosis we can find, he's bound to have a few versions of himself scattered out there, in hiding."

"Sparks," Tia said. "Like rats on a ship."

"Yeah," I said. "Or glitter in soup."

Tia and Abraham fell silent.

"Have you ever *tried* to get all of the glitter out of your soup?" I demanded. "It's really, really hard."

"Why would there be glitter in my soup in the first place?" Abraham asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe the other boys dumped it in there. Does it matter? Look, Tia, is there anything else in the notes?"

"That's all you have," Tia said. "I'll contact the other lorists and see if anyone has anything more. David, continue observation. Abraham, make your way back to the government offices and quietly put them on lockdown. Get the mayor and her cabinet into the safe cells."

"You going to call Prof?" I asked softly.

"I'll let him know," she replied, "but he's hours away, even if we send a copter for him. David. Don't do anything stupid."

"When have I done anything stupid?" I demanded.

The other two grew silent again.

"Just try to curb your natural eagerness," Tia said. "At least until we have a plan."

A plan. The Reckoners loved to plan. They'd spend months setting up the perfect trap for an Epic. It had worked just fine when they'd been a shadowy force of aggressors, striking, then fading away.

But that wasn't the case anymore. We had something we had to defend now.

"Tia," I said, "we might not have time for that. Mitosis is here today; we can't spend months deciding how to bring him down."

"Jon isn't near," Tia said. "That means no jackets, no tensors, no harmsway."

That was the truth. Prof's Epic powers were the source of those abilities, which had saved my life many times in the past. But if he got too far away, the powers stopped working for those he'd gifted them to.

"Maybe he won't attack," Abraham said, puffing slightly as he spoke into the line. He was probably jogging as he made for the government

building. “He could just be scouting. Or perhaps he is not antagonistic. It is possible that an Epic merely wants a nice place to live and will not cause problems.”

“He’s been using his powers,” I said. “You know what that means.”

We all did, now. Prof and Megan had proven it. If Epics used their powers, it corrupted them. The only reason Prof and Edmund didn’t go evil was because they didn’t use their powers directly. Giving them away filtered the ability somehow, purified it. At least, that was what we thought.

“Well,” Abraham said, “maybe—”

“Wait,” I said.

Down the way, Mitosis strode out onto the steel street, then reached back to take out a handgun he’d had tucked into the waistband of his jeans. Large-caliber magnum—far from the best of guns. It was a weapon for someone who had seen too many old movies about cops with big egos. It could still kill, of course. A magnum could do to a person’s head what a street could do to a watermelon dropped from a helicopter. My breath caught.

“I’m here,” Mitosis shouted, “for the one they call Steelslayer, the *child* who supposedly killed Steelheart. For every five minutes it takes him to reveal himself, I will execute a member of this population.”

3

"Well," Abraham said over the line, "guess that answers that."

"His clones are saying it all over the city," Tia said. "The same words from all of them." I cursed, ducking back into my alley, gripping my rifle tight and sweating.

Me. He'd come for *me*.

All my life, I'd been nobody. I didn't mind that. I'd worked hard, actually, to be precisely mediocre in all my classes. I'd joined the Reckoners in part because nobody knew who they were. I didn't want fame. I wanted revenge against the Epics. The more of them dead, the better. Sweat trickled down the sides of my face.

"One minute has passed!" Mitosis yelled. "Where are you? I would see you with my own eyes, Steelslayer."

"Damn," Tia said in my ear. "Don't panic, David. Music … music … There has to be a clue to his weakness here. What was his band again?"

"Weaponized Cupcake," I said.

"Charming," Tia said. "Their music should be on the lore archive; we've got copies of most everything in the Library of Congress."

"Two minutes!" Mitosis shouted. "Your people run from me, Steelslayer, but I am like God himself. I am everywhere. Do not think I won't be able to find someone to kill."

Images flashed in my mind. A busy bank lobby. Bones falling to the ground. A woman clutching a baby. I hadn't been able to do anything back then.

"This is what we get," Abraham said, "for coming out into the open. It is why Jon always wanted to remain hidden."

"We can't stand for something if we only move in shadows, Abraham," I said.

"Three minutes!" Mitosis shouted. "I know you have this city under surveillance. I know you can hear me."

"David …" Tia said.

"It appears you are a coward!" Mitosis said. "Perhaps if I shoot someone, you—"

I stepped out, lined up a shot, and delivered a bullet into Mitosis's forehead.

Tia sighed. "I've got reports of at least thirty-seven distinct copies of him yelling in the city. What good does it do to kill one of them?"

“Yes,” Abraham said, “and now he knows where you are.”

“I’m counting on it,” I said, dashing away. “Tia?”

“Sparks,” she said. “I’m pulling up camera feeds all over the city. David, they’re all running for you. Dozens of them.”

“Good,” I said. “As long as they’re chasing me, they aren’t shooting anyone else.”

“You can’t fight them all, you slontze,” Tia said.

“Don’t intend to,” I said, grunting as I turned a corner. “You’re going to work out his weakness and figure out how to beat him, Tia. I’m just going to distract him.”

“I’ve arrived,” Abraham said. “They’re already on alert at the government office. I’ll get the mayor and council to safety. But if I might suggest, this is probably a good time to activate the emergency message system.”

“Yeah,” Tia said, “on it.”

The mobiles of everyone in the city were connected, and Tia could dial them all up collectively to send instructions—in this case, an order to empty the streets and get indoors.

I dodged around another corner and came almost face to face with one of Mitosis’s clones. We surprised each other. He got his gun out first and fired, a deafening crack, like he was shooting a sparking *cannon*.

He also missed me. He wasn’t even close. Big handguns look impressive, and they have excellent knockdown force. Assuming you can hit your target.

I lined up my rifle sights, ignored his next shot, and squeezed the trigger. Just as I did, he thrashed, and a duplicate of him stepped away. It was like he was suddenly made of dough and the other self *pushed* out of his side.

It was nauseating. My shot took the first Mitosis, dropping him with a hole in the chest. He tried to duplicate again as he died, but the duplicate came out with a hole in its chest too, and fell forward, dying almost immediately.

The other clone, though, was also duplicating. I cursed, shooting it, but not before another version came out, and that one was already trying to clone itself *again*. I brought this one down just before it split.

I breathed in and out, my hands trembling as I lowered the rifle. Five corpses lay slumped on the ground. My rifle magazine held thirty rounds. I’d never considered that insufficient, but a minute of Mitosis cloning himself could run me out with ease.

“David?” Tia asked in my ear. “You all right?” She’d have me on camera, using Steelheart’s surveillance network.

“I’m all right,” I said, still shaking. “I just haven’t gotten used to people shooting at me.”

I took a few deep breaths, forced down my anxiety, and walked up to the Mitosis clones. They'd begun to melt.

I watched with disturbed fascination as the corpses decomposed, flesh turning to a pale tan goo. The bones melted after, and then the clothing. In seconds, each corpse was just a pile of colored gunk, and even that seemed to be evaporating.

Where did the mass for each of these new bodies come from? It seemed impossible. But then, Epics have this habit of treating physics like something that happens to *other* people, like acne and debt.

"David?" Tia said in my ear. "Why are you still standing there? Sparks, boy! The others are coming."

Right. Dozens of evil Epic clones. On a mission to kill me.

I took off in a random direction; where I was going didn't matter so much as staying ahead of the clones. "Do you have that music yet?" I asked Tia.

"Working on it."

I dashed up onto the bridge, crossing the river. That river would have made a great natural barrier for sectioning off the downtown, except for the fact that Steelheart had turned the thing into steel—effectively making it into an enormous highway, though one with a rippled surface. The river that had once flowed here had diverted to the Calumet River channel.

I reached the other side of the bridge and glanced over my shoulder. A scattering of figures in identical clothing had broken out of side streets and were running toward me, some pulling handguns from the small of their backs. They seemed to recognize me, and a few took shots.

I cursed, ducking to the side, heading past an old hotel with steel windows and a trio of flagpoles extending into the sky, flags frozen mid-flap. I almost passed it, then hesitated. One of the main doors had been frozen open.

I made a split-second decision and ran for that opening. I squeezed between door and doorway and entered the hotel lobby.

It wasn't as dark inside as I'd anticipated. I inched through a lobby with furniture like statues. Once-plush seats were now hard metal. A sofa had a depression in it where someone had been sitting when the transfersion took place.

The light came from a series of fist-size holes cut into the front windows, which were also steel now. Though empty, the lobby didn't seem dusty or derelict. I quickly realized what this was—one of the buildings that Steelheart's favored people had inhabited during the years of his rule.

I stepped on a bench by a window, leaning against it and peering through one of the holes. Outside, on the daylit street, the clones

slowed in their chase, lowering weapons, looking about. It appeared that I'd managed to lose them.

"I would have the truth!" the clones suddenly shouted in unison. The effect was even eerier than seeing them all together. "You did not kill Steelheart. You did not slay a god. What *really* happened?"

I didn't reply, of course.

"Your rumors are spreading," Mitosis continued. "People want to believe your fantasy. I will show them reality. Your head, David Charleston, and my empire in Newcago. I don't know how Steelheart truly fell, but he was weak. He needed men to administrate for him, to act as his army."

The clones continued to stroll, spreading out. Several shook, splitting into multiples.

"I am my own army," Mitosis said. "And I shall reign."

"You watching this?" I whispered.

"Yeah," Tia said. "I've got the city cameras, and I've dialed into the video feed from your earpiece. Shouldn't he be sounding dumber the more clones he makes?"

"I think something must be wrong in my notes," I said. I'd been forced to burn many of my notebooks and keep only the most important ones. I'd lost many of my primary sources and speculations, and I could have easily gotten some details wrong.

Outside, Mitosis continued to duplicate himself. Twice, three times, a half dozen. Soon there were *hundreds* of him. They spaced themselves apart with careful steps, then, one by one, stopped in place. They closed their eyes, looking toward the sky.

What is he doing? I thought, clutching my rifle. I shifted on the bench, my foot scraping the wall. Outside, some of the clones nearest the hotel snapped their eyes open and turned toward me. Sparks! He'd created his own sensor network, using hundreds of copies of his own ears. It was clear to me now that the clones had more coordination to them than I had assumed. I slipped away from the wall, trying to step quietly. There might be a back way out of this building.

"Got it," Tia said. "Archive of pre-Calamity alternative metal albums in digital format."

Her voice through the earpiece was incredibly soft. Still, outside, there was a sudden scrambling of footsteps. They'd heard.

They were coming.

I cursed and ran, leaping over a couch and scrambling toward the back hallways of the hotel.

There had to be a way out somewhere.

I passed through streams of light, holes cut like spigots into the ceiling. The hotel had this flat building in the center and a tower to the side, many stories high. I didn't want to get trapped in the tower,

so instead I turned down another hallway, passing a door that had been destroyed long ago. That light ahead was probably an exit for—

Shadows moved in through the exit. Clones, around a dozen of them, one after another. One pulled out a gun and leveled it at me, but when he squeezed the trigger, the entire thing shattered and turned to dust. The clone cursed, charging.

Huh? I thought.

There wasn't time for me to wonder. I threw myself to the side, entering another hallway. These were the administrative rooms of the hotel, behind the lobby.

"I'm trying to get you a map," Tia said.

"No," I said, sweating, "the music."

"Right."

More clones that way. I was cornered.

I ducked into a room. It had once been some kind of clerical office, judging by the desk and frozen chairs, but someone had turned the desk into a bed with cushions, and there was even a wooden door affixed by new hinges attached to the steel ones on the doorway. Impressive.

I grabbed that door and slammed it closed. An arm got in the way at the last moment.

The clone grunted on the other side as I shoved, but other hands scraped around the doorway, grabbing for me. Each had an old wristwatch on them, and those snapped and broke as they rubbed on the door or wall. When the watches hit the ground, they shattered to dust.

"They're unstable," Tia said—she was still watching via my video feed. "The more clones he makes, the worse their molecular structure holds together."

The clones forced the door open, throwing me backward. I whipped my rifle from my shoulder and got off one shot as a dozen of them fought into the room, heedless of the danger. Their clothing ripped easily, and when fragments fell off, they disintegrated immediately.

" 'Albums by Weaponized Cupcake,' " Tia read.

The clones piled on top of me, hands gripping my throat, others pulling my gun away from me.

"Which one?" Tia asked. "*Appetite for Tuberculosis*? *The Blacker Album*? *Ride the Lightrail*?"

"Kind of getting murdered here, Tia!" I said, struggling to keep the hands from my neck.

There were too many. Hands pressed in closer, cutting off my air. Clones continued to clog the room, and those nearby began to split, making it difficult to move. They wanted to trap me in here. Even if I got these fingers off my neck, I wouldn't be able to run.

Darkness grew at the edges of my vision, like a creeping mold. I struggled to pull the hands from my throat.

"David?" Tia's voice in my ear. "David, you need to turn on your mobile speaker! I can't do anything. David, can you hear me? David!"

I closed my eyes. Then I let go of the hands holding my neck and forced my fingers through the press of arms. Choking, feeling as if my windpipe would collapse at any moment, I strained and got my fingers to my shoulder, where my mobile was attached. I flipped the switch on the side. Music blared into the cramped, suffocating room.

The clone directly on top of me started to shake and vibrate, like he was going to split—but instead, he began to melt, the flesh coming off the bones. The others nearby backed away in a hurry, smashing identical versions of themselves up against the walls.

I gasped in air. For a moment, all I could do was lie there, clone flesh and bones melting to goo around me.

Air. Air is really, *really* awesome.

The music continued unabated, a thrashing metal riff moving from chord to chord with the quality, almost, of a beating heart. The clones near me vibrated in time with it, their skin shaking like ripples in water, but they did not melt.

"So *awful*," one of them said, a sneer on his lips. "Jason couldn't write a riff to save his life. The same four chords, over and over and over."

I frowned, then scrambled for my gun. I sat in the middle of the group of clones. Some had moved out of the room.

"That's odd," Tia said.

I need a way out, I thought.

"Even the ones outside are vibrating a little bit, David. I can see it on the cameras. Surely they can't hear the music."

"They're connected," I said, coughing. I stumbled to my feet, holding my rifle in one hand, ripping the mobile from my shoulder with the other. I flashed it about, trying to ward the clones off. "We need more music," I said. "A lot of it, loud as we can get it. That—"

The clones charged me. Ignoring the danger, they piled on top of me, reaching for my mobile, trying to rip it out of my fingers. Those nearest to me started to melt, but they still grabbed at my arm, fighting even as the flesh sloughed off their bones.

I backed into a corner, then noticed a sliver of light coming from above. A window, covered with a board.

To the sound of thumping rock music, I held the clones at bay, leaving a half dozen of them melting on the floor. Others gathered opposite me in the room, faces shadowed in the dim room. "How did it really happen?" they asked in unison. "Which Epic killed Steelheart, and how did you take the credit?"

“It’s not like Steelheart was immortal,” I said.

“He was a god.”

“He was a cursed man,” I said, inching my way toward the window. The gooey remnants of bone and flesh steamed off me, evaporating, leaving my clothing as dry as if nothing had happened.

“Just like you are. I’m sorry.”

The clones stepped forward. I used the music to melt those who drew close, but they didn’t seem to care. They marched on, falling to the ground, dissolving to nothing. They kept coming at me until only one stood in the doorway, though I could see shadows of a few more waiting outside. Why were they killing themselves?

One toward the back took out his handgun. It didn’t break as he raised it. Sparks. Mitosis had just been trying to reduce his numbers to make the copies more stable.

I cried out, jumping onto the desk. I had to drop my rifle to rip the board off the window.

A large crack sounded from behind. I felt an immediate thump in my right side, just under my arm—like someone had punched me.

Back in the factory, we would watch old movies every night, after work was done. They’d played on an old television hung from the cafeteria wall. Getting shot didn’t feel like it looked in those shows. I didn’t gasp and collapse to the ground. I didn’t even realize I’d been shot at first. I thought the clones had thrown something at me.

No pain. Just heat on my side.

That was the blood.

I stared down at the wound. The bullet had ripped out a chunk of flesh just beneath my armpit before cutting through my upper arm. It was messy, all warm and wet. My hand didn’t work right, wouldn’t grip.

I’d been shot. Calamity … I’d been *shot*.

For a terrifying moment, that was all I could think about. People died when they got shot. I started to shake; the room seemed to be trembling. I was going to die.

Another shot bounced off the wall beside my head.

You’ll die way sooner if you don’t move! a piece of me thought. *Now!*

I spun and threw my mobile at Mitosis. That worked; when the music got close, his clone wavered and melted. The mobile came to rest in the doorway, warding off those outside. I still had in my earpiece, though, which was connected wirelessly.

Somehow, I gathered the presence of mind to haul myself by one arm up and out the window. I tumbled into sunlight and collapsed to the ground outside.

I’d often heard that it wasn’t the bullet wound that killed you—it was the shock. The horror of being hit, the panicked sense of terror,

prevented you from getting out of danger and seeking help.

I slammed one hand over the hole in my side, which was worse than the hit in my arm, and squeezed the wound shut as I pressed my back against the wall.

"Tia?" I said. I figured I was still close enough to the mobile for the earpiece to work. I wasn't sure how far I'd have to go before I lost reception.

"David!" Her voice came into my ear. "Sparks! Sit tight. Abraham is on his way."

"Can't sit," I said with a grunt, climbing to my feet. "Clones are coming."

"You've been shot!"

"In the side. Legs still work." I stumbled away, toward the river. I remembered there being some inlets to the understreets there.

Tia cursed on the line, her voice starting to fuzz as I hobbled away from the hotel. Fortunately, it seemed that Mitosis hadn't anticipated my actually escaping this way. Otherwise, he'd already have clones back here.

"Calamity!" Tia said. "David, he's multiplying. There are hundreds of him, running for you."

"It's okay. I'm a rhinoceros astronaut."

She was silent a moment. "Oh, sparks. You're going delusional."

"No, no. I mean, I'm surprising. I'll surprise him. What's the most surprising thing you can think of? Bet it's a rhinoceros astronaut." The connection was fading. "I can hold out, Tia. You just find the answer to this. Get some music playing across the city, maybe on some copters. Play it loud. You'll figure it out."

"David—"

"I'll distract him, Tia," I said. "That's my job." I hesitated. "How am I doing?"

No reply. I was too far from the hotel.

Sparks. I was going to have to do this last part alone. I hobbled toward the river.

4

I tore off part of my shirt, wrapping it around my arm as I stumbled along; then I put my hand back to the side wound. I reached the stairs to the river and looked over my shoulder.

They came like a wave, a surge of identical figures scrambling along the street.

I cursed, then hobbled down the steps. Still, this was good. A terrible kind of good. So long as Mitosis was chasing me, he wasn't hurting anyone or trying to take over the city.

I reached the bottom of the staircase as the flood of figures arrived, some jumping over the sides of the rail to skip a few stairs, others scrambling down each step.

I pushed myself faster toward a set of holes drilled into the wall just above the river. Air vents for the understreets; they'd be big enough to crawl in, but not by much. I reached one just before the clones and clambered inside, kicking away a hand that tried to grab my ankle. I managed to spin around, facing the opening, and backed away into the darkness.

Figures crowded around the tunnel opening, cutting off my light. One of them squatted down, looking at me. "Clever," he said. "Going where only one of me can reach you at a time. Unfortunately, it also leaves you cornered."

I continued to back away. I was losing strength, and my blood made my hands slippery on the steel.

Mitosis crawled into the tunnel, prowling forward.

A lot of Epics liked to think of themselves as predators, the step beyond humans. The apex of evolution. Well, that was idiocy. The Epics weren't above humans. If anything, they were less civilized—more instinctual. A step backward.

That didn't mean I wasn't terrified to see that dark figure stalking me—to be confined in an endless tunnel with the thing as I slowly bled out.

"You'll tell me the truth," Mitosis said, getting closer. "I'll wring it from you, little human. I'll know how Steelheart *really* died."

I met his gaze in the darkness.

"I wanna kiss you!" I shouted. "Like the wind kisses the ra-i-ain!"

I belted out the song as loudly as I could. Tia had played it earlier, and I knew the words, though I'd been too distracted by the whole

getting-strangled-then-getting-shot thing to listen closely.

I'd heard it as a child, played time and time again on the radio until I and pretty much everyone else got sick of it.

Mitosis melted in front of me. I stopped, breathing deeply, as a second clone crawled over the melting form of the first.

"Cute," he growled. "How long can you sing, little human? How are you feeling? I smell your blood. It—"

"I'm gonna miss you," I shouted, "like the sun misses the ra-i-ain!"

He melted.

"You realize," the next one said, "that now I'm going to have to kill everyone in the city. Can't risk them having heard these songs. I—"

Melt.

"Stop *doing* that!" the next one snapped. "You—"

Melt.

I kept at it, though my singing grew softer and softer with each clone I killed. One of them found a knife and passed it up the line. That didn't melt; it just fell to the floor of the pipe each time one of them died. The next one picked it up and kept crawling.

Each clone got closer. I moved back farther in the tunnel until I felt a ledge behind me. The pipe turned down toward the understreets—and an assuredly fatal drop.

"I could shoot you, I suppose," the next Mitosis said. "Well, shoot you *again*. But then I wouldn't get the pleasure of cutting off pieces of you as you scream out the truth to me."

I screamed out the next lyric, which proved to be a bad idea, because once I'd melted that Mitosis, I found myself slumping against the rounded wall of the small tunnel. I was close to blacking out.

The next Mitosis plucked the knife from the goo, holding it up and letting bits of his other self run down the blade and drip to the floor.

He shook his head. "I was trained classically, you know," he said.

I frowned. This was a change from the talk of torture, murder, and other sunny topics. "What?"

"Trained classically," Mitosis said. "I was the only one in that band who knew his way around an instrument. I wrote song after song, and what did we play? Those stupid, *stupid* riffs. The same chords. Every *damn* song."

Something about this tweaked a part of my brain, like a piece of popcorn on fire because it cooked too long. But I couldn't focus on it now; his talking had almost let him reach me. I sang. Weakly.

I didn't have a lot of energy left. How long had it been? How much blood had I lost?

This Mitosis wavered, but as my voice faltered, he came back.

"I am beyond you, little human," Mitosis said, and I could hear the smirk in his voice. "Now, let's get on with my questions."

He reached me, took me by the arm, and yanked.

That *hurt*. Somehow, during all the running and scrambling, I'd never noticed the pain. Shock.

I'd been in shock.

Now that pain came crashing down on me, an entire detonated building of agony. I found my voice and screamed.

"How did Steelheart die?" Mitosis asked.

"He died at the hands of an Epic," I said, groaning.

"I thought so. Who did it?"

"He did it himself," I whispered. "After I tricked him. He killed himself, but I caused it. He was brought down by a common man, Lawrence."

"Lies!"

"Common people," I whispered, "will bring you all down."

He yanked my arm again, delivering pain in a spike of agony. What did it matter what I said? He wasn't going to believe me. I closed my eyes and started to feel numb. It felt nice. Too nice.

Distantly, I heard music.

Singing?

A hundred voices. No, more. Singing in unison, the song that had blared earlier from my mobile. Their singing was far from perfect, but there was a *force* to it.

"No. What are you doing? Stay back!" Mitosis roared.

All those voices, singing. I could barely make out the words, but I could hear the progression of chords. It actually sounded pretty, since I could ignore the awful lyrics.

"I am an army unto myself! Stay back! I am the new emperor of this city! You are *mine*!"

I forced my eyes open. Mitosis, in front of me, shook and vibrated, though the song was distant.

The clones were all connected—and if enough of them were hearing the song, the effect transferred even to the ones who weren't.

In a moment, the line of clones in the pipe screamed, holding their heads.

"Common people," I whispered. "Who have had enough."

Mitosis exploded, each clone popping in a sudden burst. Their deaths opened up a passage to the light outside. I blinked against the abrupt sunshine, and despite the confines, I could see what was out there. People, standing on the frozen steel river, in a mass. Thousands of them, dressed in suits, work clothing, uniforms. They sang together, almost more of a chant.

The people of Newcago had come.

5

"You're unreasonably lucky, son," Prof said, settling onto the stool beside my hospital bed. He was a solid man with greying hair, goggles tucked into the pocket of his shirt.

I flexed my hand. Prof's healing powers—gifted to me under the guise of a piece of technology—had mended my wounds. I didn't remember much about the last few hours. I'd lain in a daze, several city doctors working to keep me alive long enough for Prof to arrive.

I sat back against the headboard, breathing deeply, remembering the final moments with Mitosis.

They came to me clearly, though the time after that was muddy.

"How did she get them all there?" I asked. "The people?"

"The Emergency Message System," Prof said. "Tia sent out a plea to everyone near the river, begging them to go to you and to sing along to the music she sent through their mobiles. They could easily have remained in hiding. Ordinary people have no business fighting Epics."

"I'm an ordinary person."

"Hardly. But it doesn't matter."

"It *does*, Prof." I looked at him. "This will never work if they don't start fighting."

"Last time the people fought," Prof said, "the Epics slaughtered millions and the country collapsed."

"That's because we didn't know how to defeat them," I said. "Now we do."

Prof sighed and stood up. "I've been told not to antagonize you, to let you rest. We'll talk about this later. You did well against Mitosis. He …" He hesitated.

"What?" I asked.

"Recently, Mitosis has been staying in Babylon Restored. Manhattan, as it used to be called."

"That's where you just visited."

Prof nodded. "That he should come here when I went to scout Babiar … it smacks of him coming intentionally while I was gone. That couldn't have happened, unless …"

"What?"

Prof shook his head. "We'll talk later. Rest now. I need to think. And son, as well as you did, I want you to do some thinking too. What you did was risky. You can't just keep rushing in, making snap decisions.

You are *not* the leader of this team."

"Yes sir."

"We have an entire city's worth of people to worry about now," he said, walking toward the door to the small room, which was warmed by sunlight through an open window. "Sparks. That's the one thing I never wanted." His face seemed shadowed in that moment. Grim, along with something else. Something … darker.

"Prof," I said, "how do Epics get their weaknesses?"

"It's random," he said immediately. "Epics' weaknesses can be anything. They make about as much sense as the powers themselves—which is to say, none." He frowned, looking at me. "You know that better than anyone, son. You're the one who has studied them."

"Yeah," I said, looking out the window. "Mitosis's weakness was his own music."

"Coincidence."

"Hell of a coincidence."

"Well, maybe the weakness wasn't really the music," Prof said. "Maybe it was performance anxiety, or insecurity or the like. The music just reminded him of that."

That was probably right. Still …

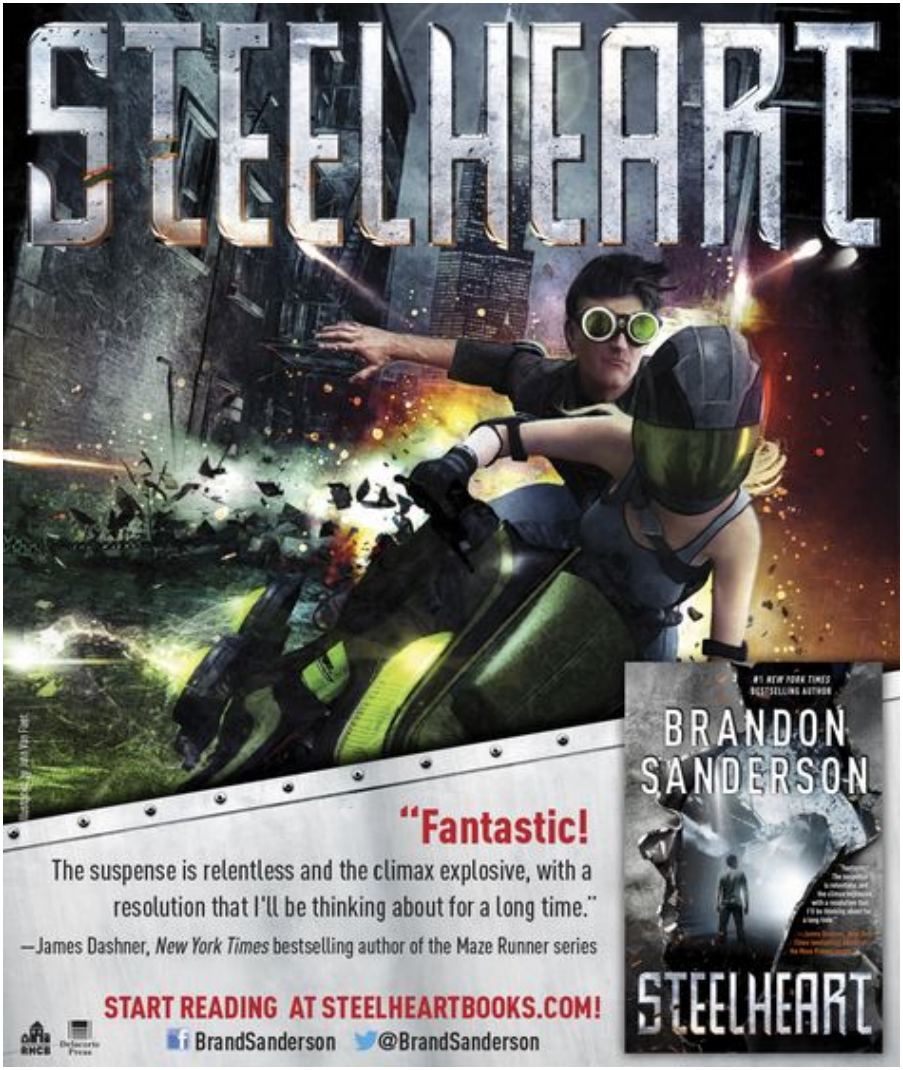
"He loathed the music," I said. "His own art. There's something here, Prof. Something we haven't noticed yet."

"Perhaps." Prof lingered in the doorway. "Abraham sent me with a message."

"Which is?" I vaguely remembered Abraham pulling me out of the tunnel and carrying me to the hospital.

Prof frowned. "His exact words were 'Tell him he was right about this city … so I'll forgive him about the hot dog. Just this once.' "

The Reckoners series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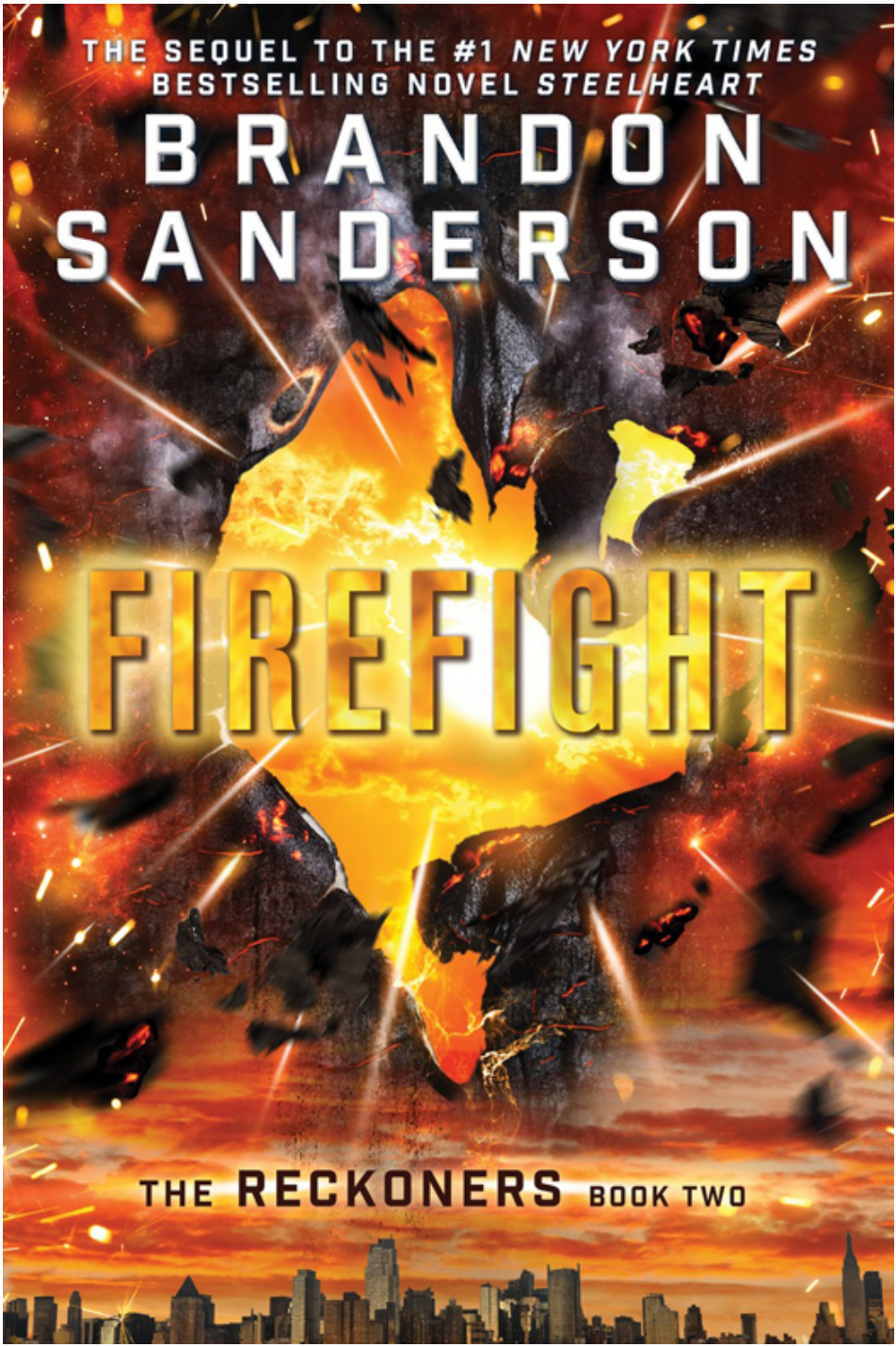
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For Nathan Goodrich,
A dear friend who was patient enough
To read my books when they were bad.

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Prologue

I watched Calamity rise.

I was six years old then, as I stood in the night on the balcony of our apartment. I can still remember how the old air conditioner rattled in the window next to me, covering the sound of Father's crying. The overworked machine hung out over a plummet of many stories, dripping water like perspiration from the forehead of a suicidal jumper. The machine was broken; it blew air but didn't make anything cold. My mother had frequently turned it off.

After her passing, my father left it on; he said that he felt cooler with it running.

I lowered my popsicle and squinted at that strange red light, which rose like a new star above the horizon. Only no star had ever been that bright or that *red*. Crimson. It looked like a bullet wound in the dome of heaven itself.

On that night, Calamity had blanketed the entire city in a strange warm glow. I stood there—popsicle melting, sticky liquid dripping down around my fingers—as I watched the entire ascent.

Then the screaming had started.

PART ONE

1

“DAVID?” The voice came from my earpiece.

I shook out of my reverie. I’d been staring at Calamity again, but nearly thirteen years had passed since Calamity’s rise. I wasn’t a kid at home with my father any longer; I wasn’t even an orphan working the munitions factory in the understreets.

I was a Reckoner.

“Here,” I answered, shouldering my rifle and crossing the rooftop. It was night, and I swore I could see a red cast to everything from Calamity’s light, though it had never again appeared as bright as it had that first evening.

Downtown Newcago spread out before me, its surfaces reflecting starlight. Everything was steel here. Like a cyborg from the future with the skin ripped off. Only, you know, not murderous. Or, well, alive at all.

Man, I thought. *I really do suck at metaphors*.

Steelheart was dead now, and we had reclaimed Newcago’s upper streets—including many amenities the elite had once reserved for themselves. I could take a shower every day in my own bathroom. I almost didn’t know what to do with such luxury. Other than, you know, not stink.

Newcago, at long last, was free.

It was my job to make sure it stayed that way.

“I don’t see anything,” I whispered, kneeling beside the edge of the rooftop. I wore an earpiece that connected wirelessly to my mobile. A small camera on the earpiece allowed Tia to watch what I was seeing, and the earpiece was sensitive enough to pick up what I said, even when I spoke very softly.

“Keep watching,” Tia said over the line. “Cody reports that Prof

and the mark went your direction."

"It's quiet here," I whispered. "Are you sure—"

The rooftop exploded just beside me. I yelped, rolling backward as the entire building shook, the blast spraying bits of broken metal across me. *Calamity!* Those shots packed a *punch.*

"Sparks!" Cody yelled over the line. "She got around me, lad. Coming up on your north side—"

His voice was drowned out as another glowing energy pulse shot up from the ground below and ripped the side off the rooftop near where I hid.

"Run!" Tia yelled.

Like I needed to be told. I got moving. To my right, a figure materialized out of light. Dressed in a black jumpsuit and sneakers, Sourcefield wore a full mask—like a ninja might wear—and a long black cape. Some Epics bought into the whole "inhuman powers" thing more than others. Honestly, she looked ridiculous—even if she did glow faintly blue and crackle with energy spreading across her body.

If she touched something, she could transform into energy and travel through it. It wasn't true teleportation, but close enough—and the more conductive the substance, the farther she could travel, so a city made of steel was kind of like paradise for her. It was surprising it had taken her so long to get here.

As if teleportation weren't enough, her electrical abilities also made her impervious to most weapons. The light shows she gave off were famous; I'd never seen her in person before, but I'd always wanted to see her work.

Just not from so close up.

"Scramble the plan!" Tia ordered. "Prof? Jon! Report in! Abraham?"

I listened with only half an ear as a globe of crackling electricity whizzed by me. I skidded to a stop and dashed the other way as a second globe passed right through where I'd been standing. That one hit the rooftop, causing another explosion and making me stumble. Shards of metal pelted my back as I scrambled to the side of the building.

Then I leaped off.

I didn't fall far before hitting the balcony of a penthouse apartment. Heart pounding, I darted inside. A plastic cooler waited on the other side by the door. I threw open the lid and

fished around, trying to remain calm.

Sourcefield had come to Newcago earlier in the week. She'd started killing immediately—random people, no perceivable purpose behind it. Just like Steelheart had done in his early days. Then she'd started calling out for the citizens to turn in the Reckoners, so she could bring us to justice.

A twisted brand of Epic justice. They killed whomever they wanted, but to strike back was an offense so great they could barely conceive it. Well, she'd see soon enough. So far, our plan to bring her down wasn't going terribly well, but we were the Reckoners. We prepared for the unexpected.

From the cooler, I pulled out a water balloon.

This, I thought, *had better work*.

Tia and I had debated for days on Sourcefield's weakness. Every Epic had at least one, and often they were random. You had to research an Epic's history, the things they avoided, to try to figure out what substance or situation might negate their powers.

This balloon contained our best guess as to Sourcefield's weakness. I turned, hefting the balloon in one hand, rifle in the other, watching the doorway and waiting for her to come after me.

"David?" Tia asked over the earpiece.

"Yeah?" I whispered, anxious, balloon ready to throw.

"Why are you watching the balcony?"

Why was I …

Oh, right. Sourcefield could travel through walls.

Feeling like an idiot, I jumped backward just as Sourcefield came down through the ceiling, electricity buzzing all around her. She hit the floor on one knee, hand out, a ball of electricity growing there, casting frantic shadows across the room.

Feeling nothing but a spike of adrenaline, I hurled the balloon. It hit Sourcefield right in the chest, and her energy blast fizzled into nothing. Red liquid from the balloon splashed on the walls and floor around her. Too thin to be blood, it was an old powdered fruit drink you mixed with water and sugar. I remembered it from childhood.

And it was her weakness.

Heart thumping, I unslung my rifle. Sourcefield stared at her dripping torso as if in shock, though the black mask she wore

kept me from seeing her expression. Lines of electricity still worked across her body like tiny glowing worms.

I leveled the rifle and pulled the trigger. The *crack* of gunfire indoors all but deafened me, but I delivered a bullet directly toward Sourcefield's face.

That bullet exploded as it passed through her energy field. Even soaked with the Kool-Aid, her protections worked.

She looked at me, her electricity flaring to life—growing more violent, more dangerous, lighting the room like a calzone stuffed with dynamite.

Uh-oh …

2

I scrambled into the hall as the doorway exploded behind me. The blast threw me face-first into the wall, and I heard a *crunch*.

On one hand, I was relieved. The crunching sound meant that Prof was still alive—his Epic abilities granted me a protective field. On the other hand, an evil, angry killing machine was chasing me.

I pushed myself back from the wall and dashed down the metal hallway, which was lit by the mobile I wore strapped to my arm. *Zip line*, I thought, frantic. *Which way? Right, I think*.

"I found Prof," Abraham's voice said in my ear. "He's encased in some kind of energy bubble. He looks frustrated."

"Throw Kool-Aid on it," I said, panting, dodging down a side hall as electric blasts ripped apart the hallway behind me. Sparks. She was furious.

"I'm aborting the mission," Tia said. "Cody, swing down and pick up David."

"Roger," Cody said. A faint thumping sounded over his communication line—the sound of copter rotors.

"Tia, no!" I said, entering a room. I threw my rifle over my shoulder and grabbed a backpack full of water balloons.

"The plan is falling apart," Tia said. "Prof is supposed to be point, David, not you. Besides, you just proved that the balloons don't work."

I pulled out a balloon and turned, then waited a heartbeat until electricity formed on one of the walls, announcing Sourcefield. She appeared a second later, and I hurled my balloon at her. She cursed and jumped to the side, and red splashed along the wall.

I turned and ran, shoving my way through a door into a

bedroom, making for the balcony. “She’s afraid of the Kool-Aid, Tia,” I said. “My first balloon negated an energy blast. We have the weakness right.”

“She still stopped your bullet.”

True. I jumped out onto the balcony, looking up for the zip line.

It wasn’t there.

Tia cursed in my ear. “That’s what you were running for? The zip line’s two apartments over, you slontze.”

Sparks. In my defense, hallways and rooms all look very similar when everything’s made of steel.

The thumping copter was near now; Cody had almost arrived. Gritting my teeth, I leaped up onto the rail, then threw myself toward the next balcony over. I caught it by its railing, my rifle swinging over one shoulder, backpack on the other, and hauled myself up.

“David …,” Tia said.

“Primary trap point is still functioning?” I asked, climbing over a few lawn chairs that had been frozen in steel. I reached the other side of the balcony and jumped up onto the railing. “I’ll take your silence as a yes,” I said, and leaped across.

I hit hard, slamming into the steel railing of the next balcony over. I grabbed one of the bars and looked down—I was dangling twelve stories in the air. I shoved down my anxiety and, with effort, hauled myself up.

Behind me, Sourcefield peeked out onto the balcony I’d left. I had her scared. Which was good, but also bad. I needed her to be reckless for the next part of our plan. That meant provoking her, unfortunately.

I swung up onto the balcony, fished out a Kool-Aid balloon, and lobbed it in her direction. Then, without looking to see if the balloon hit, I jumped onto the railing and grabbed the zip line handle, then kicked off.

The balcony exploded.

Fortunately, the zip line was affixed to the roof, not the balcony itself, and the cable remained firm. Bits of molten metal zipped through the dark air around me as I dropped along the line, picking up speed. Turns out those things are a lot faster than they look. Skyscrapers passed me on either side in a blur. I felt like I was *really* falling.

I managed a shout—half panicked, half ecstatic—before everything lurched around me and I crashed into the ground, rolling on the street.

"Whoa," I said, pushing myself up off the ground. The city spun like a lopsided top. My shoulder hurt, and although I'd heard a crunch as I hit, it hadn't been loud. The protective field that Prof had granted me was running out. They could only take so much punishment before he had to renew them.

"David?" Tia said. "Sparks. Sourcefield cut the zip line with one of her shots. That's why you fell at the end."

"Balloon worked," a new voice said over the line. Prof. He had a strong voice, rough but solid. "I'm out. Couldn't report earlier; the energy bubble interfered with the signal."

"Jon," Tia said to him, "you weren't supposed to fight her."

"It happened," Prof snapped. "David, you alive?"

"Kind of," I said, stumbling to my feet and picking up the backpack, which had slipped off as I rolled. Red juice drink streamed from the bottom. "Not sure about my balloons, though. Looks like there might be a few casualties."

Prof grunted. "Can you do this, David?"

"Yes," I said firmly.

"Then run for the primary trap point."

"Jon," Tia said. "If you're out—"

"Sourcefield ignored me," Prof said. "It's just like before, with Mitosis. They don't want to fight *me*; they want *you*. We have to bring her down before she gets to the team. You remember the path, David?"

"Of course," I said, searching for my rifle.

It lay broken nearby, cracked in half in the middle of the forestock. Sparks. Looked like I'd messed up the trigger guard too. I wouldn't be firing that anytime soon. I checked my thigh holster and the handgun there. It seemed good. Well, as good as a handgun can be. I hate the things.

"Flashes in the windows of that apartment complex, moving down," Cody said from the copter. "She's teleporting along the outer wall, heading toward the ground. Chasing you, David."

"I don't like this," Tia noted. "I think we should abort."

"David thinks he can do this," Prof said. "And I trust him."

Despite the danger of the moment, I smiled. I hadn't realized until joining the Reckoners just how lonely my life had been.

Now, to hear words like those …

Well, it felt good. Really good.

"I'm bait," I said over the line, positioning myself to wait for Sourcefield and searching in my backpack for unbroken balloons. I had two left. "Tia, get our troops into position."

"Roger," she said reluctantly.

I moved down the street. Lanterns hung from the old, useless street lamps nearby, giving me light. By it, I caught sight of some faces peeking through windows. The windows had no glass, just old-fashioned wooden shutters we'd cut and placed there.

In assassinating Steelheart, the Reckoners had basically declared all-out war on the Epics. Some people had fled Newcago, fearing retribution—but most people had stayed here, and many others had come. During the months since Steelheart's fall, we'd almost doubled the population of Newcago.

I nodded to the people watching. I wouldn't shoo them back to safety. We, the Reckoners, were their champions—but someday, these people would have to stand on their own against the Epics. I wanted them to watch.

"Cody, do you have a visual?" I asked into my mobile.

"No," Cody said. "She should be coming any moment…." The dark shadow of his copter passed overhead. Enforcement—Steelheart's police force—was ours now. I still wasn't sure how I felt about it. Enforcement had done its best to kill me on several occasions. You didn't just get over something like that.

In fact, they *had* killed Megan. She'd recovered. Mostly. I felt at the gun in my holster. It had been one of hers.

"I'm getting into position with the troops," Abraham said.

"David? Any sign of Sourcefield?" Tia asked.

"No," I said, looking down the deserted street. Empty of people, lit by a few lonely lanterns, the city almost felt like it had back in Steelheart's days. Desolate and dark. Where was Sourcefield?

She can teleport through walls, I thought. *What would I do in her case?* We had the tensors, which let us tunnel through basically anything we wanted. What would I do now if I had those?

The answer to that was obvious. I'd go down.

She was underneath me.

3

“SHE’S gone into the understreets!” I said, pulling out one of my two remaining water balloons. “She’s going to come up nearby, try to surprise me.”

Even as I said it, lightning moved across the street, and a glowing figure materialized up through the ground.

I hurled my Kool-Aid balloon, then ran.

I heard it burst, then heard Sourcefield swear. For a moment, no energy blasts tried to fry me, so I assumed that I’d hit her.

“I’m going to destroy you, little man!” Sourcefield yelled after me. “I’ll rip you apart like a piece of tissue paper in a hurricane!”

“Wow,” I said, reaching an intersection and taking cover by an old mailbox.

“What?” Tia asked.

“That was a really good metaphor.”

I glanced back at Sourcefield. She strode down the street, alight with electricity. Lines of it flew from her to the ground, to nearby poles, and to the walls of the buildings as she approached. Such *power*. Was this what Edmund—the kindly Epic who powered Newcago for us—would be like if he weren’t constantly gifting his abilities away?

“I refuse to believe,” the woman shouted, “that you killed Steelheart!”

Mitosis said the same thing, I thought. He’d been another Epic who had come to Newcago recently. They couldn’t accept that one of their most powerful—an Epic that even others like Sourcefield had feared—had been killed by common men.

She looked magnificent, all in black with a fluttering cape, electricity leaping from her in sparks and flashes. Unfortunately, I

didn't need her magnificent. I needed her *angry*. Some members of Enforcement crept out of a building nearby, carrying assault rifles on their backs and Kool-Aid balloons in their hands. I motioned them toward an alley. They nodded and pulled back to wait.

It was time for me to taunt an Epic.

"I didn't kill only Steelheart!" I shouted at her. "I've killed dozens of Epics. I'll kill you too!"

An energy blast hit my mailbox. I dove for cover behind a building, and another blast hit the ground only inches from where I crouched. As I brushed the ground with my arm, a *shock* ran up it, jolting me. I cursed, putting my back to the wall, and shook my hand. Then I peeked around the side of the building. Sourcefield was running for me.

Great! Also, *terrifying*.

I sprinted for a doorway across the street. Sourcefield tore around the corner just as I entered the building.

Inside, a path had been cleared through what had once been some kind of car showroom. I ran straight across it, and Sourcefield followed, teleporting past the front wall at speed.

I dashed through room after room, following the pattern we'd set out earlier.

Right, duck into that room.

Left down a hallway.

Right again.

We'd used another of Prof's powers—the one he disguised as technology called the tensors—to drill doorways. Sourcefield followed on my tail, passing through walls in flashes of light. I never stayed in her sight long enough for her to get off a good shot. This was perfect. She …

… she slowed down.

I stopped beside the door out the back of the building. Sourcefield had stopped following. She stood at the end of a long hallway leading to my door, electricity zipping from her to the steel walls.

"Tia, you see this?" I whispered.

"Yeah. Looks like something spooked her."

I took a deep breath. It was far less than ideal, but … "Abraham," I whispered, "bring the troops in. Full-out attack."

“Agreed,” Prof said.

The Enforcement troops who had been lying in wait stormed in the front of the car dealership. Others came down the steps from above; I heard their tromping footfalls. Sourcefield glanced back as a pair of soldiers entered the hallway in full gear, with helms and futuristic armor. The fact that they lobbed bright orange water balloons slightly spoiled the coolness of the effect.

Sourcefield laid a hand on the wall beside her, then transformed into electricity and melded into the steel, disappearing. The balloons broke uselessly on the floor of the corridor.

Sourcefield emerged back into the hallway and released bursts of energy down the corridor. I squeezed my eyes shut as the shots blasted the two soldiers, but I heard their cries.

“This is the best the infamous Reckoners can do?” Sourcefield shouted as more soldiers came in, throwing water balloons from all directions. I forced myself to watch, pulling out my handgun, as Sourcefield dropped through the floor.

She came up behind a group of soldiers in the middle of the corridor. The men screamed as the electricity took them. I gritted my teeth. If they lived, Prof would be able to heal them under the guise of using “Reckoner technology.”

“The balloons aren’t working,” Tia said.

“They are,” I hissed, watching as one hit Sourcefield. Her powers wavered. I took a shot, as did three Enforcement gunmen who had set up opposite me on the far end of the corridor.

All four bullets hit; all four were caught in her energy field and destroyed. The balloons were working, just not well enough.

“All units on the southern side of the corridor,” Abraham’s voice said, “pull back. Immediately.”

I ducked out the door as a sudden barrage of bullets shook the building. Abraham, who had set up behind the Enforcement sharpshooters at the far end of the corridor, was unloading with his XM380 gravatonic minigun.

I grabbed my mobile and patched into Abraham’s video feed. I could see it from his perspective, gun flashing in the dark, bullet after bullet ricocheting down the steel corridor, throwing sparks. Any that reached Sourcefield *still* got trapped or deflected by her electric field. A group of men and women behind Abraham lobbed balloon after balloon. Above, soldiers pulled back a

trapdoor in the ceiling and dumped a bucket of Kool-Aid.

Sourcefield jumped away, dodging it. Step by step, she retreated from that splashing liquid. She *was* afraid of the stuff, but it wasn't working completely. An Epic's weakness was supposed to negate their powers totally, and this wasn't doing so.

I was pretty sure I knew why.

Sourcefield unleashed a barrage of energy blasts toward Abraham and the others. Abraham cursed and went down, but his protective field—gifted to him by Prof under the guise of a jacket with a technological forcefield—protected him and sheltered the people behind him. I heard groans through the feed, though I couldn't see anything. I flipped it off.

"You are *nothing*!" Sourcefield shouted.

I strapped the mobile to my arm and stepped back into the hallway in time to see her send a wave of electricity up through the ceiling toward those above. Screams.

I hefted my last water balloon, then threw it. It exploded across her back.

Sourcefield spun on me. Sparks! A High Epic in her glory, energy flaring … Was it any wonder that these things presumed to rule?

I spat at her feet, then turned and ran out the back door.

She shouted after me, following.

"Upper units, Haven Street," Tia said in my ear, "get ready to lob."

People appeared on the roof of the building I'd just left, and they hurled water balloons down as Sourcefield broke out after me. She ignored them, following me. If anything, the falling balloons just made her madder.

When they splashed near her, however, she stopped shouting.

Right, I thought, sweating, slamming my way into the building across the street. It was a small apartment complex. I ran through the entryway and into the first apartment.

Sourcefield followed in a storm of energy and anger. She didn't stop for walls; she passed through them in flashes of light.

Just a little farther! I urged silently as I shut a door. This complex was populated, and we'd replaced many of the frozen steel doors with wooden ones that worked.

Sourcefield came through the wall as I leaped over a steel couch and entered the next room—which was pitch-black inside.

I slammed the door.

The light of Sourcefield entering blinded me. Her aura hit, and suddenly that little shock I'd taken earlier seemed miniscule. Electricity shot through me, causing my muscles to go weak and spasm. I reached to press the large button on the wall, but my arms weren't working right.

I slammed my face into it instead.

I collapsed, succumbing to the shock of her energy. Above, the ceiling of the small darkened room—which had once been a bathroom—opened up, dumping several hundred gallons of Kool-Aid down on us. Above that, showerheads turned on, spraying red liquid.

Sourcefield's energy dampened dramatically. Electricity ran up her arms in little ribbons, but kept shorting out. She reached for the door, but it had locked after me. Cursing, she held up a fist, trying to summon the energy to teleport, but the constant rain of liquid disrupted her powers.

I struggled to my knees.

She turned on me and growled, then seized me by the shoulders.

I reached up, grabbing her mask by the front, then yanking it off like a ski mask. It had a plastic piece on the front that obviously fit over the nose and mouth. A filter of some sort?

Beneath the mask she was a middle-aged woman with curly brown hair. The liquid continued to rain down, and it ran in streams along her cheeks, across her lips. Getting into her mouth.

Her light went out completely.

I groaned, climbing to my feet as Sourcefield shouted in panic, scrambling at the door, rattling it, trying to get it open. I tapped my mobile, bathing the room in a soft white light.

"I'm sorry," I said, raising Megan's handgun to her head.

Sourcefield looked to me, eyes widening.

I squeezed the trigger. This time, the bullet didn't bounce off. She fell to the ground, and a deeper red liquid began to pool around her, mixing with what was raining down. I lowered the gun.

My name is David Charleston.

I kill people with super powers.

4

I unlocked the door and pushed out of the bathroom, dripping wet with imitation fruit juice. A group of soldiers stood in the room, weapons out. They lowered them as they saw me. I gestured over my shoulder, and Roy—captain of the Enforcement team—sent two officers to check the body.

I was drained and shaky, and it took me two tries to get Megan's gun holstered. I didn't say anything as several soldiers saluted me on my way out. They regarded me with a mixture of awe and reverence, and one whispered, "Steelslayer." In less than a year with the Reckoners, I'd personally killed almost a dozen Epics.

What would these men say if they knew that I owed most of my reputation to the powers of another Epic? The forcefield that cushioned me from harm and the healing that brought me back from near death … these were both part of Prof's power portfolio, things that he disguised as technology. He was what we called a gifter, an Epic who could lend his extraordinary talents to others. For some reason, that let him remain uncorrupted by them—others could use his powers for him, but using them himself threatened to destroy him.

Only a handful of people knew the truth about Prof. Those ranks didn't include the common people of Newcago—outside the building, a large group of them had gathered. Like the soldiers, they watched me with reverence and excitement. To them I was a celebrity.

I ducked my head and pushed through them, uncomfortable. The Reckoners had always been a shadowy group, and I hadn't joined up for the notoriety. Unfortunately, we needed to be seen

so that the people of the city would know that someone was fighting back—and hopefully that would inspire them to fight back as well. It was a hard line to walk; I certainly didn't want to be worshipped.

Beyond the gawkers, I spotted a familiar figure. Dark-skinned and well-muscled, Abraham wore a black and grey military uniform—camouflage for a city made of steel. The clothing was ripped and scuffed; I knew enough to recognize that the protective field Prof had given him had been stretched to its limits. Abraham gave me a thumbs-up, then nodded toward a building nearby.

I headed that direction while, behind me, Roy and his team carried out the dead Epic to show off the body. It was important that the people see Epics as mortal, but I didn't glory in the death. Not as I might once have.

She looked so terrified at the end, I thought. *She could have been Megan, or Prof, or Edmund … just a normal person caught up in all of this. Driven to do terrible things by powers she didn't ask for*.

Knowing that the powers *literally* corrupted the Epics changed my perspective on all of this. A lot.

I entered the building and climbed the steps, eventually entering a room on the second floor, lit by a single light in the corner. As I'd anticipated, I found Prof here, watching out the window with crossed arms. He wore a thin black lab coat that draped down to his calves, a pair of goggles tucked into the pocket. Cody waited on the other side of the dark room, a lanky silhouette wearing a flannel shirt with the arms cut off, sniper rifle slung over his shoulder.

Prof, aka Jonathan Phaedrus, founder of the Reckoners. We fought Epics. We killed them. And yet we were led by one. When I'd first found out, that had been difficult to reconcile. I'd grown up practically worshipping the Reckoners, all the while loathing the Epics. Discovering that Prof was both … it had been like discovering that Santa Claus was secretly a Nazi.

I'd gotten over it. Once upon a time, my father's idea that good Epics would come had been laughable to me. Now, after meeting not one but three good Epics … well, the world was a different place. Or I guess it was the same place—I just saw it a little more accurately.

I stepped up beside Prof at the window. Tall, with salt-and-

pepper hair, he had square features. He looked so *solid* standing there, arms clasped behind his back. Something stable, immobile, like this city's buildings themselves. As I joined him, he raised his hand, gripping my shoulder, then nodded to me. A nod of respect, and of approval.

"Nice work," he said.

I grinned.

"You look like hell, though," he noted.

"I doubt hell has this much Kool-Aid," I replied.

He grunted, looking back out the window. More people had gathered, some raising cheers at the victory. "I never realized," Prof said softly, "how paternal I would grow for these people. Staying in one place, protecting the city. It's been very good for me to remember why we do this. Thank you for encouraging us. You've done something great here."

"But …?" I asked, recognizing the catch in Prof's tone.

"But now we have to make good on what we've promised these people. Safety. A good life." He turned to me. "First Mitosis, then Instabam, now Sourcefield. There's a pattern to their attacks, and I feel that someone is trying to get my attention. Someone who knows about what I am, and who is sending Epics to target my team instead of me."

"Who?" Who could possibly know what Prof was? Even most members of the Reckoners didn't know about him. Just the team here in Newcago was in on his secret.

"I have suspicions," Prof said. "But this isn't the time to talk about it."

I nodded, knowing that pushing him on the topic wouldn't get me any further at the moment. Instead I looked down at the crowd, and the dead Epic. "Sourcefield trapped you, Prof. How did it happen?"

He shook his head. "She caught me straight-out with that electricity-bubble thing. Did you know she could make one of those?"

I shook my head. I'd had no idea.

Prof grunted. "To get free, I'd have needed to use my powers."

"Oh," I said. "Well … maybe you *should* use them. Maybe we could practice, and see if there's a way you can be an Epic without … you know. I mean, you can gift them without the corruption happening, so maybe there's some secret to using

them yourself. Megan—"

"Megan is not your friend, son," Prof said, interrupting quietly but firmly. "She's one of them. She always has been."

"But—"

"No." Prof squeezed my shoulder. "You *have* to understand this, David. When an Epic lets their powers corrupt them, they choose to become the enemy. That's how we have to think of it. Any other way leads to madness."

"But you used your powers," I said, "to save me. To fight Steelheart."

"And both times, it almost destroyed me. I have to be firm with myself, be more careful. I can't let the exceptions become the reality."

I swallowed and nodded.

"I know that to you this has always been about revenge," Prof said. "That's a strong motivation, and I'm glad you've channeled it, son. But I don't kill them for vengeance, not anymore. This thing we do … for me, it's like putting down a rabid dog. It's a mercy."

The way he said it made me feel sick. Not because I didn't believe him or disliked what he said—sparks, his motives were probably more altruistic than mine. It was just that I knew he was thinking about Megan. He felt betrayed by her, and honestly, he probably had every right to feel that way.

But Megan *wasn't* a traitor. I didn't know what she was, though I intended to find out.

Down below, a car pulled up to the crowd. Prof glanced at it. "Go deal with them," he said. "I'll meet you back at the hideout."

I turned as the mayor climbed out of the car, along with a few members of the city council.

Great, I thought.

Honestly, I'd rather have faced another Epic.

5

I left the building as soldiers cleared a path for Mayor Briggs. She wore a white pantsuit and a matching fedora, similar to the other members of the city council. Unique clothing, well styled. That contrasted with the everyday people, who wore … well, basically anything.

During the early days in Newcago, clothing had been shockingly hard to come by. Everything that hadn't been on a person's back had been transformed to steel during the Great Transfersion. Over the years, however, Steelheart's foraging crews had scoured the suburbs, emptying warehouses, old malls, and abandoned houses. These days we had enough to wear—but it was a strange mix of different styles.

The upper class, though, wanted to stand out. They avoided practical clothing like jeans, which lasted surprisingly long with a few patches here and there. During Steelheart's reign they'd had their clothing made, and had chosen archaic designs. Things from a classier time, or so they said. It wasn't the sort of clothing you could merely find lying about.

We'd decided that I would be our liaison with Briggs and the rest. I was the only Newcago native in the Reckoners, and we wanted to limit access to Prof. The Reckoners did not rule Newcago—we protected it. It was a division we all thought was important.

I stepped up through the crowd, ignoring those who whispered my name. The attention was embarrassing, honestly. All of these people worshipped me, but they barely remembered men like my father who had died fighting the Epics.

"Looks like your handiwork, Charleston," Mayor Briggs said,

nudging the corpse on the ground with her foot. “Steelslayer puts another notch in his rifle.”

“My rifle’s broken,” I said. Too harshly. The mayor was an important woman, and had done wonders helping to organize the city. It was just that she was one of *them*—Steelheart’s upper class. I’d expected them all to end up out on their ears, but somehow—through a series of political maneuvers I couldn’t follow—Briggs had ended up in charge of the city instead of being exiled.

“I’m sure we can get you a new gun.” She looked me over, not smiling. She liked to convey a “no-nonsense” attitude. To me, it seemed more like a “no-personality” attitude.

“Walk with me a pace, David,” Briggs said, turning to stroll away. “You don’t mind, do you?”

I did mind, but I figured this was one of those questions you weren’t supposed to answer. I wasn’t *completely* sure, though. I wasn’t a nerd, mind you, but I’d spent a lot of my youth studying Epics, so I’d had limited experience with social interaction. I mixed with ordinary people about the same way that a bucket of paint mixed with a bag of gerbils.

“Your leader,” Briggs said as we walked off a little ways from the crowd. “I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Prof is busy.”

“I imagine that is so. And I must say, we truly appreciate the protection you and yours offer this city.” She looked over her shoulder at the corpse, then cocked an eyebrow. “However, I can’t say that I understand your entire game plan.”

“Mayor?” I asked.

“Your leader allowed the wheels of politics to put me in charge of Newcago, but I know next to nothing of the Reckoners’ goals for this city—indeed this country. It would be nice to know what you are planning.”

“That’s easy,” I said. “Kill Epics.”

“And if a band of Epics joins together and comes to attack the city at once?”

Yeah. That would be a problem.

“Sourcefield,” she said, “terrorized us for five days while you furiously planned. Five days is a long time for a city to be under the thumb of another tyrant. If five or six powerful Epics got together and came with the intent to exterminate, I fail to see

how you'd protect us. Certainly you might end up picking them off one at a time, but Newcago would turn into a wasteland before you were done."

Briggs stopped walking and turned to me, now that the others couldn't hear. She looked me in the eyes, and I saw something in her expression. Was that … fear?

"So I ask," she said softly, "what is your plan? After years of hiding and only attacking Epics of middling importance, the Reckoners revealed themselves and brought down *Steelheart himself*. That means you have a greater goal, right? You've started a war. You know a secret to winning it, don't you?"

"I …" What could I say? This woman, who had weathered the reign of one of the most powerful Epics in the world—and who had seized control following his fall—looked to me with a plea on her lips and terror in her eyes.

"Yes," I said. "We have a plan."

"And …?"

"And we might have found a way to stop them all, Mayor," I said. "Any Epic."

"How?"

I smiled in what I hoped was a confident way. "Reckoner secret, Mayor. Trust me, though. We know what we're doing. We'd never start a war we expected to lose."

She nodded, looking placated. She went back into businesslike mode, and now that she had my ear she had a dozen things she wanted me to ask Prof about—most of which seemed attempts on her part to position him and the Reckoners politically. Her influence among the elite of Newcago would grow a great deal if she could parade Prof around as a friend. That was part of why we kept our distance.

I listened, but was distracted by what I'd told her. *Did* the Reckoners have a plan? Not really.

But *I* did.

We eventually returned to where Sourcefield's body lay. More people had gathered, including some members of the city's fledgling press, who took pictures. They got a few shots of me, unfortunately.

I passed through the crowd and knelt beside the corpse. She'd been a rabid dog, as Prof had put it. Killing her *had* been a mercy.

She came for us, I thought. *And this is the third one who avoided*

engaging Prof. Mitosis had come to the city while Prof had been away. Instabam had tried to lose Prof in the chase, gunning for Abraham. Now Sourcefield had captured Prof, then left him behind to chase me.

Prof was right. Something was going on.

"David?" Roy asked. He knelt, wearing his black and grey Enforcement armor.

"Yeah."

Roy held out something in a black-gloved hand. Flower petals in a vibrant rainbow of hues—each petal bleeding between three or four colors, like mixed paint.

"These were in her pocket," Roy said. "We didn't find anything else on her."

I waved Abraham over, then showed him the petals.

"Those are from Babilar," he said. "What used to be known as New York City."

"That's where Mitosis had been working before he came here," I said softly. "Coincidence?"

"Hardly," Abraham said. "I think we need to go show these to Prof."

6

WE still kept a secret base hidden within the bowels of Newcago. Though I visited an apartment up above to shower each day, I slept down here, as did the others. Prof didn't want people to know where to find us. Considering that the latest Epics to visit had all specifically tried to kill us, it seemed a good decision.

Abraham and I hiked in through a long hidden passage that was cut directly into the metallic ground. The tunnel's sides bore the distinctive smooth look created by tensors. When one of us held Prof's disintegration powers, we could reduce sections of solid metal, rock, or wood to dust. This gave the tunnel a sculpted feel, as if the steel were mud that we'd hollowed out with our hands.

Cody guarded the way into the hideout. We always set a watch after an operation. Prof kept expecting one of the Epics who showed up to be a decoy—someone for us to kill while a more powerful Epic watched and tried to discover how to follow us.

It was all too possible.

What will *we do if a group of Epics decides to bring down the city?* I thought, shivering as Abraham and I entered the hideout.

Lit by yellow lightbulbs screwed directly into the walls, the hideout was a medium-sized complex of steel rooms. Tia sat at a desk at the far side; red-haired and middle-aged, she wore spectacles, a white blouse, and jeans. Her desk was a lavish wooden one that she'd set up a few weeks back. It had seemed a strange sign to me, a symbol of permanence.

Abraham walked up to her and dropped the flower petals onto her desk. Tia raised an eyebrow at them. "Where?" she asked.

“Sourcefield’s pocket,” I said.

Tia gathered up the petals.

“That’s the third Epic in a row who’s come here and tried to destroy us,” I said. “And each had a connection to Babylon Restored. Tia, what’s going on?”

“I’m not sure,” she said.

“Prof seems to know,” I said. “He said as much to me earlier, but he wouldn’t give me an explanation.”

“Then I’ll let him tell you when he’s ready,” she said. “For now, there’s a file here on the table for you. The thing you asked about.”

She was trying to distract me. I dropped my backpack—the pieces of my rifle stuck out the top—and crossed my arms, but found myself glancing toward the table, which held a folder with my name written on the top.

Tia slipped away, entering Prof’s room and leaving Abraham and me alone in the main chamber. He settled down in a seat at the workbench, placing his gun on it with a thump. The gravatonics glowed green at the bottom, but one of them appeared to have cracked. Abraham took some tools off the wall and began to work on disassembling the gun.

“What aren’t they telling us?” I asked, taking the file off Tia’s desk.

“Many things,” Abraham said. His light French accent made him sound thoughtful. “It is the proper way. If one of us gets taken, we cannot reveal what we know.”

I grunted, leaning back against the steel wall beside Abraham. “Babilar … Babylon Restored. Have you been there?”

“No.”

“Even before?” I asked, flipping through the pages Tia had left me. “When it was called Manhattan?”

“I never visited,” Abraham said. “Sorry.”

I glanced at Tia’s desk. A stack of folders there looked familiar. My old Epic files, the ones I’d made for every Epic I knew about. I leaned over, opening a folder.

Regalia, the first file read. *Formerly Abigail Reed*. The Epic who currently ruled Babilar. I slipped out a photo of an older, distinguished-looking African American woman. She looked familiar. Hadn’t she been a judge, long ago? Yes … and after that, she’d starred in her own reality television show. *Judge Regalia*. I

flipped through the pages, refreshing my memory.

"David …," Abraham warned as I flipped a page.

"They're *my* notes," I said.

"On Tia's desk." He continued to work on his gun without looking at me.

I sighed, closing the folder. Instead I began reading the file that Tia had left for me. There was only one page inside; it was addressed to Tia from one of her contacts, a lorist—Reckoner talk for a person who studied Epics.

It is often hard to delve into who Epics were before their transformations, particularly the early ones, the file said. *Steelheart is an excellent example of this. Not only did we lose much of what was once recorded on the internet, but he actively worked to suppress anyone who knew him before Calamity. Now that we know his weakness—thanks to your young friend—we can surmise that he wanted to remove anyone who knew him before, in case they did not fear him.*

Still, I have been able to recover some little information. Named Paul Jackson, Steelheart was a track star in his local high school. He was also reputed to be a bully of some stature, to the point that—despite his winning record—he was not offered any major scholarships. There were incidents. I can't find the specifics, but I think he might have left some fellow teammates with broken bones.

After high school, he got a job working as a night watchman at a factory. He spent his days posting on various conspiracy theory forums, speculating about the impending fall of the country. I don't think this was precognitive—he was just one of a large group of eccentrics who were dissatisfied with the way the United States was run. He frequently said he didn't believe that the common people were capable of voting in their best interests.

That's about it. I will admit, however, that I'm curious why you want to know the past of a dead *Epic. What is it that you're researching, Tia?*

Underneath, scrawled in Tia's handwriting, were the words, *Yes, David, I'm also curious what it is you're digging to find. Come talk to me.*

I lowered the paper, then walked over toward Prof's room. We didn't use doors in the hideout, just sheets of cloth. I could hear voices inside.

"David …," Abraham said.

"In these notes, she told me to come talk to her."

"I doubt she meant right away."

I hesitated by the doorway.

"… these flowers are an *obvious* sign that Abigail is involved," Tia was saying inside, speaking in a low voice. I could barely hear.

"That's probable," Prof replied. "But the petals themselves are very obvious. It makes me wonder—either a rival Epic is trying to turn our attention toward her, or …"

"Or what?"

"Or she herself is trying to taunt us into coming. I can't help but see this as a gauntlet thrown down, Tia. Abigail wants me to come face her—and she's going to keep sending people to try to kill my team until I go. It's the only reason I can think of that she'd *specifically* recruit Firefight."

Firefight.

Megan.

I pushed into the room, ignoring Abraham's sigh of resignation. "Megan?" I demanded. "What about Megan?"

Tia and Prof stood face to face, and both turned on me like I was a piece of snot on the windshield following a sneeze. I lifted my chin and stared back at them. I was a full member of this team; I could be part of …

Sparks. Those two really knew how to *stare*. I found myself sweating. "Megan," I repeated. "You've, uh, found her?"

"She murdered a member of a Reckoner team in Babilar," Prof said.

The words took me like a punch to the gut. "It wasn't her," I decided. "Whatever you think happened, you don't have all the facts. Megan isn't like that."

"Her name is Firefight. The person you call Megan was just a lie she created to fool us."

"No," I said. "That *was* the real her. I saw it in her; I *know* her. Prof, she—"

"David," Prof snapped, exasperated. "She is one of *them*."

"So are you!" I shouted at him. "You think we can just keep doing this, like we've been doing? What happens when an Epic like Backbreaker or Obliteration comes to town? Someone who can simply vaporize the entire city to get at us?"

"That's why we never went this far!" Prof shouted back at me.

“That’s why we kept the Reckoners secret, silent, and never attacked Epics who were too powerful! If this city is destroyed, it will be *your fault*, David Charleston. Tens of thousands of deaths will be on *your* head!”

I stepped back, shocked, suddenly aware of what I was doing. Was I really arguing with Jon Phaedrus, head of the Reckoners? High Epic? The air seemed to *warp* around him as he shouted at me.

“Jon,” Tia said, crossing her arms. “That was unfair. You agreed to attack Steelheart. We’re all culpable here.”

He looked to her, and some of the anger left his eyes. He grunted. “We need a way out of this, Tia. If we’re going to fight this war, we’ll need weapons against them.”

“Other Epics,” I said, finding my voice.

Prof glared at me.

“He might be right,” Tia said.

Prof turned that glare on her instead.

“What we’ve accomplished,” Tia said, “we’ve done because of your powers. Yes, David brought down Steelheart, but he’d never have survived long enough to do so without your shielding. It might be time to start asking ourselves new questions.”

“Megan spent all of those months with us,” I said, “and never turned against us. I saw her use her powers, and yes she got a little cranky afterward, but she was still good, Prof. And during the fight with Steelheart, when she saw me, she came back to herself.”

Prof shook his head. “She didn’t use her powers against us because she was a spy for Steelheart and didn’t wish to reveal herself,” he said. “I’ll admit, that may have led her to be more reasonable—more herself—during her time with us. But she no longer has a reason to avoid using her abilities; the powers will have consumed her, David.”

“But—”

“David,” Prof said, “she *killed* a Reckoner.”

“It was witnessed?”

Prof hesitated. “I don’t have all the details yet. I know there is a recording at least, taken when she was fighting one of our people. And then he was found dead.”

“It wasn’t her,” I said, then made a quick decision. “I’m going to go to Babilar and find her.”

“Like hell you are,” Prof said.

“What else will we do?” I asked, turning to leave. “This is the only plan we have.”

“This isn’t a plan,” Prof said. “It’s hormones.”

I stopped at the doorway, blushing, then glanced back.

Prof picked at the flower petals that Tia had dumped on the dresser. He looked at her, still standing with her arms crossed. She shrugged.

“*I* am going to Babylon Restored,” Prof finally said. “I have business there with an old friend. *You* may accompany me, David. But not because I want you to recruit Megan.”

“Why, then?” I demanded.

“Because you’re one of the most capable point men I have, and I’m going to need you. The best thing we can do to protect Newcago right now is keep the Epics from fixating upon it. We’ve overthrown one emperor, and in so doing made a statement: that the day of Epic tyrants is over, and that no Epic—no matter how powerful—is safe from us. We need to make good on that promise. We need to *scare* them, David. Instead of a single free city, we need to present to them an entire continent in rebellion.”

“So we bring down the tyrants of other cities,” I said, nodding. “And we start with this Regalia.”

“If we can,” Prof said. “Steelheart was probably the strongest Epic alive, but I promise you that Regalia is the most wily—and that makes her just as dangerous, if not more so.”

“She’s sending Epics here,” I pointed out, “to try to kill the Reckoners. She’s scared of you.”

“Possibly,” Prof said. “Either way, in sending Mitosis and the others here, Regalia declared war. You and I are going to kill her for that—just like we did with Steelheart. Just like you did with Sourcefield today. Just like we’ll do to any Epic who stands against us.”

He met my eyes.

“Megan’s not like the others,” I said. “You’ll see.”

“Perhaps,” Prof said. “But if I’m right, son, I want you there so that you can pull the trigger. Because if someone is going to have to put her down, it should be a friend.”

“A mercy,” I said, my mouth going dry.

He nodded. “Pack your things. We leave later tonight.”

7

LEAVE. Newcago.

I'd never … I mean …

Leave.

I'd just said I intended to go. That had been in the heat of the moment. As Tia and Prof pushed out of the room, I stood there in the doorway, coming to a realization of what I'd just done.

I'd never left the city. I'd never *thought* of leaving the city. Inside the city there had been Epics, but outside the city there was chaos.

Newcago was all I'd ever known. And now I was leaving it.

To find Megan, I thought, forcing down my anxiety and following Prof and Tia into the main room. *It will only be for a little while.*

Tia walked to her desk and began gathering her notes—apparently, if Prof was going to Babilar, she'd be going too. Prof started giving orders to Cody and Abraham. He wanted them to stay in Newcago to watch the city.

"Yeah," I said. "Gather my things. Leave the city. Of course. That's exactly what I'd been intending to do. Sounds like fun."

Nobody paid attention. So, blushing, I went to pack my bag. I didn't have much. My notebooks, which Tia had copied for redundancy. Two changes of clothing. My jacket. My gun—

My gun. I set my backpack on the floor and pulled out the broken rifle, then walked over to Abraham, offering it up like a wounded child before a surgeon.

He inspected it, then looked up at me. "I'll get you one of my spares."

"But—"

He rested a hand on my shoulder. “It is an old weapon, and it served you well. But don’t you think you should upgrade, David?”

I looked down at the broken gun. The P31 was a great rifle, based off the old M14, one of the best rifles ever made. Those were solid weapons, designed before things got all modern, fancy, and sterile. We’d made P31s at Steelheart’s munitions factory back when I was a kid; they were sturdy and dependable.

But Steelheart hadn’t equipped his own soldiers with these; the P31 had been for selling to others. Steelheart hadn’t wanted to give modern equipment to potential enemies.

“Yeah,” I said. “All right.” I set the rifle down. I mean, it’s not like I was *attached* to it. It was just a tool. Really.

Abraham squeezed my shoulder in sympathy, then led me to the equipment room, where he began hunting through boxes. “You’ll want something mid-range. A 5.56 all right?”

“I suppose.”

“AR-15?”

“Ugh. AR-15? I’d rather not have my gun break down on me every second week.” Besides, every wannabe and their dog had an M16 or M4 variant these days.

“G7.”

“Not accurate enough.”

“FAL?”

“A 7.62? Maybe,” I said. “Though I hate the triggers.”

“As picky as a woman with her shoes,” Abraham grumbled.

“Hey,” I said. “That’s insulting.” I knew plenty of women who were pickier with their guns than they were with their shoes.

Abraham fished in a chest and came up with a rifle. “Here. What about this?”

“A Gottschalk?” I said skeptically.

“Sure. It’s very modern.”

“It’s German.”

“Germans make very good weapons,” Abraham said. “This has everything you’ll need. Automatic, burst, or semiauto settings, remote fire, electron-compressed retractable scope, huge magazines, the ability to fire flash-shots and modern bullets. Very accurate, good sights, solid trigger without too much or too little give.”

I took the rifle hesitantly. It was just so … black.

I liked guns with some wood on them, a gun that felt natural.

Like you could take it hunting, rather than only kill people with it. This rifle was all plastic and black metal. It was like the weapons Enforcement carried.

Abraham slapped me on the shoulder as if the decision had been made and walked out to talk to Prof. I held the rifle up by its barrel. Everything Abraham said about it was right. I knew my guns, and the Gottschalk was a fine weapon.

"You," I said to it, "are on probation. You'd better impress me."

Great. Now I was talking to guns. I sighed and slung it over my shoulder, then pocketed a few magazines.

I stepped out of the equipment room, looking over my small pack of possessions. It hadn't taken long at all to put together my entire life.

"Devin's team from St. Louis is already on its way," Prof was saying to Abraham and Cody. "They'll help you hold Newcago. Don't let anyone know I'm gone, and don't engage any Epics until the new team arrives. Keep in touch with Tia, and let her know *everything* that happens here."

Abraham and Cody nodded. They were used to teams splitting up and moving around. I still didn't know how many people were in the Reckoners altogether. The members sometimes talked as if this were the only team, but I knew that was an affectation to throw off anyone who might be spying on the group.

Abraham clasped hands with me, then pulled something from his pocket and held it up. A small silver chain with a pendant in the shape of a stylized *S* hanging on the end. It was the mark of the Faithful, the religion to which Abraham belonged.

"Abraham …," I said.

"I know you don't believe," he said. "But you are living the prophecy right now, David. It's as your father said. The heroes will come. In a way, they *have*."

I glanced to the side, where Prof set down a duffel bag for Cody to carry. I closed my fist around Abraham's pendant and nodded. He and his kind believed that the evil Epics were a test from God, and that good Epics would come if mankind endured.

It was naive. Yes, I was starting to think about how good Epics —like Prof—might help us, but I didn't buy into all of the religious mumbo jumbo. Still, Abraham was a friend, and the gift was sincere.

"Thanks," I said.

“Stand,” Abraham said. “This is the true test of a man. He who will stand when others grow complacent.”

Abraham picked up Tia’s pack. She and Prof hadn’t taken much longer to get ready than I had. As a Reckoner, you learned to live light. We’d already changed hideouts four times while I’d been with them.

Before we left, I ducked into Edmund’s room to say goodbye. He was sitting and reading a novel by lamplight, an old science fiction book with yellowed pages. He was the strangest Epic I could imagine. Soft-spoken, slender, aging … He had a genuine smile on his lips as he rose.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I’m leaving for a while,” I said.

“Oh!” He hadn’t been listening. Edmund spent most days in this little room, reading. He seemed to take his subservient postion for granted, but he also seemed to enjoy his life as it was. He was a gifter, like Prof—in Edmund’s case, he granted his powers to men and women in Enforcement who used them to charge the power cells that ran the city.

“Edmund?” I asked as he clasped hands with me. “Do you know what your weakness is?”

He shrugged. “I’ve told you before that I don’t seem to have one.”

And we suspected he was lying. Prof hadn’t pushed the issue; Edmund complied with us in every other way.

“Edmund, it might be important,” I said softly. “For stopping the Epics. All of them.” There were so few Epics people had actually had a *conversation* with, particularly about their powers.

“Sorry,” Edmund said. “I thought I knew it for a while—but I was wrong. Now I’m as baffled as anyone.”

“Well, what did you *think* it was?”

“Being near a dog,” he said. “But it really doesn’t affect me like I thought it did.”

I frowned, making a mental note to tell Prof about this. It was more than we’d gotten from him before. “Thanks anyway,” I said. “And thanks for what you do for Newcago.”

Edmund walked back to his chair, picking up his book. “Some other Epic will always control me, whether it be Steelheart or Limelight. It doesn’t really matter. I don’t care to be in charge anyway.” He sat down and continued reading.

I sighed and made my way back out into the main room. There, Prof slung a pack onto his shoulder, and I joined him as the last one out, entering the catacombs under Newcago.

We made little conversation as we hiked a half hour or so to one of the hidden garages near a road leading up out of the understreets and into the city. There, Abraham and Cody packed our gear into a jeep for us. I'd been hoping we'd take one of the copters, but that was apparently too showy.

"Watch out for púcas as you travel, lad," Cody said, shaking my hand. "Could be imitating anything out there."

"Once again," Tia said as she settled into the seat in front of me, "those are from *Irish* mythology, you nitwit."

Cody just winked at me and tossed me his camouflage baseball cap. "Y'all stay safe." He gave us a thumbs-up, then he and Abraham retreated back into the understreets.

So it was that—a short time later—I found myself sitting in the back of the jeep, wind blowing my hair, holding a new gun and watching my home for all nineteen years of my life retreat behind me. The dark skyline was something I'd rarely seen. Even before Calamity I'd almost always been among, or beneath, the city's buildings.

Who was I, if I wasn't in Newcago? It was similar to the hollowness I felt inside some nights when I wondered what I was supposed to do with my life now that *he* was gone. Now that I'd won, and my father was avenged.

The answer was beginning to settle on me like a dinosaur upon its nest. My life wasn't just about one city, or one Epic, anymore. It was about a war. It was about finding a way to stop the Epics.

Permanently.

PART TWO

8

PAPERS flapped in my hands as we sped down the highway. We'd hit a relatively unbroken patch of asphalt, though we still thumped across a rough section of road now and then. I hadn't imagined that a roadway like this could decay so quickly. Less than thirteen years had passed since Calamity, but already the highway was torn up with potholes and plants peeking up out of cracks like zombie fingers out of graves.

Many cities we passed were decayed, windows shattered, buildings crumbling. I spotted some cities that were in better repair, lit by bonfires in the distance, but these seemed more like little bunkers, surrounded by walls with fields outside—fiefdoms ruled by one Epic or another.

We traveled at night, and though I saw the occasional fire, I didn't spot a single glimmer of electric lights. Newcago really *was* an anomaly. Not only had the steel preserved the tall skyscrapers and elegant skyline, but Steelheart's reign had also maintained basic services.

Prof drove with goggles on, the jeep's headlights replaced with UV floodlights that would be invisible to anyone without the proper headgear. I sat in the jeep's back seat and spent my time reading through the notes and essays Tia had given me. I held the sheets inside a small box in my lap that had a flashlight inside of it, and this mostly masked the light.

The car slowed, then thumped up and down as Prof carefully navigated a bad patch of rubbled asphalt. Cars lay like the husks of enormous beetles along the sides of the road; they'd first been drained of their gasoline, then gutted for parts. Our vehicle, fortunately, had been converted to run on one of Edmund's power

cells.

As we drove slowly over the rubble, I heard something out in the night, like a snapping branch. The jeep's back seat wasn't enormous, but it didn't have a roof, so I could easily set my box aside and maneuver my new rifle. I raised it to my shoulder and tapped a button that folded out the automatic scope. It worked very well, I was forced to admit, switching to night vision on its own and letting me zoom in on the source of the noise.

Through the holosights I picked out a few scavengers in ragged clothing squatting behind one of the broken cars in the darkness. They seemed like wild people, with long beards and sloppily stitched clothing. I watched them with the safety off, looking for weapons, until another head bobbed up. A little girl, maybe five years old. One of the men hushed her, pushing her down, then continued watching our jeep until we crossed the patch of broken street and sped up, leaving them behind.

I lowered the gun. "It really is bad out here."

"Anytime a town starts to band together," Tia said from the front passenger seat, "an Epic decides to either rule the place or lay waste to it."

"It's worse," Prof said softly, "when one of their own develops powers."

New Epics were rare, but they did happen. In a city like Newcago, we'd get maybe a single new one every four or five years. But they were dangerous, as an Epic who first manifested powers almost always went a little mad in the beginning, using their abilities wildly, destroying. Steelheart had quickly rounded up such individuals and subjugated them. Out here, there would be nobody to stop their initial rampage.

I settled back, disturbed, but eventually returned to my reading. This was our third night on the road. When dawn had broken after the first night, Prof had driven us into a hidden safe house. Apparently, the Reckoners had many of them along major roadways. Usually they were hollows sheared into rock with tensors, then secured with hidden doors.

I hadn't pushed Prof too much about the tensors. Even with me, he talked about them as if they were technology—and not secretly just a cover for his powers. He only allowed the Reckoners in his personal team to use them, which made sense. Most Epic powers had a distinct range. From what I'd been able

to determine, you had to be within a dozen miles or so of Prof for the gifted tensors or energy shields to work.

What made it even more confusing was that the Reckoners *did* have technology that emulated Epic powers. Such as the gauss gun I'd used in fighting Steelheart, and the dowser, which was a device they used to test if someone was an Epic or not. I'd been suspicious that these things had also secretly been from Prof's powers, but he'd promised me they weren't. It *was* possible to kill an Epic, then use something about their DNA to reverse engineer machines that mimicked their powers. That's what made Prof's deception so believable. Why assume that your team leader is an Epic when there's a perfectly good technological explanation for the things the team can do?

I flipped through to the back of the stapled series of notes that Tia had given me. There, I found the profile for Sourcefield, which we'd gathered soon after she'd come to Newcago. *Emiline Bask*, it read. *Former hotel desk clerk. Fan of Asian pulp cinema. Gained Epic powers two years after Calamity*.

I scanned through her history. She'd spent some time in Detroit, Madison, and Little Blackstone. She'd allied with Static and his band of Epics for a few years, then she'd vanished for a while before turning up in Newcago to kill the lot of us. This was interesting, but it wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted to know her pre-Epic history, in particular her personality before she became one of them. Had she been a troublemaker, like Steelheart?

For that, I only had a few paragraphs. She'd been raised by an aunt after her mother committed suicide, but the pages said nothing about her personality. There was a note at the end. *Mother's trauma related to grandparents, obviously*.

I leaned forward as the jeep picked up a little speed. "Tia?"

"Hmm?" she asked, looking up from her datapad, which she hid in a box like mine to shield the light.

"What does this mean—it references Sourcefield's mother's trauma being related somehow to her grandparents?"

"Not sure," she said. "What I gave you was part of a larger file that Jori had compiled; he sent us only the relevant information."

My own files didn't have much on Sourcefield. I looked at that paragraph again, lit inside my shoebox. "Would you mind asking him for the rest of the information?"

"What is it about dead Epics that fascinates you so?" Tia asked.

Prof kept his eyes forward, but he seemed to perk up.

"You remember Mitosis?" I asked. "That Epic who tried to take Newcago a few months back?"

"Of course."

"His weakness was rock music," I said. "Specifically his own music." He'd been a minor rock star before gaining his Epic powers.

"So?"

"So … it's a mighty coincidence, isn't it? That his own music should negate his powers? Tia, what if there's a pattern to the weaknesses? One we haven't cracked yet?"

"Someone would have spotted it," Prof said.

"Would they?" I asked. "Early on, nobody even *knew* about the weaknesses. The Epics weren't quick to tell people about them. Besides, there was mass chaos."

"Unlike now?" Tia asked.

"Now … there's institutionalized chaos," I said. "Look, how long ago did the Reckoners start working? How long ago did the lorists start gathering data on weaknesses? It's only been a few years, right? And by then, it was just common knowledge that Epic weaknesses are bizarre and random. Only, what if they're not?"

Tia tapped her datapad. "Worth looking into, I suppose. I'll get you more about Sourcefield's past."

I nodded, gazing between them, eastward along the road. I couldn't see much in the darkness, though a haze on the horizon took me by surprise. Was that light?

"Dawn already?" I asked, checking my mobile.

"No," Prof said. "It's the city."

Babylon Restored. "So soon?"

"David, we've been traveling for over two days," Tia said.

"Yeah, but Babilar is on the other side of the country! I figured … I don't know, like it would take at least a week. Or two."

Prof snorted. "When the roads were good, you could make this drive in one day, easy."

I settled back in my seat, bracing myself against the bumps as Prof sped up. He obviously wanted to reach the city well before daybreak. We passed a growing number of suburbs, but even still,

things out here were just so … *empty*. I'd imagined buildings everywhere, maybe farms squeezed between them. The truth was that the landscape outside Newcago just seemed to be filled with … well, a lot of nothing at all.

The world was both a larger place and a smaller place than I'd imagined.

"Prof, how do you know Regalia?" I blurted out.

Tia glanced at me. Prof kept driving.

"What do you remember about Regalia, David?" Tia asked, perhaps to break the silence. "From your notes."

"I've been scanning," I said, getting excited. "She's one of the most powerful Epics around, and one of the most mysterious. Water manipulation, remote projection, hints of at least one other major power."

Tia snorted.

"What?" I asked.

"Your tone," she said. "You sound like a fan talking about his favorite movie."

I blushed.

"I thought you hated the Epics," Tia said.

"I do." Well, you know, all except for the one I'd kind of fallen for. And Prof. And I guess Edmund. "It's complicated. I hated Steelheart. *Really* hated Steelheart—and all of them because of it, I guess. But I've also spent my life studying them, learning about them.…"

"You can't immerse yourself in something," Prof said softly, "without coming to respect it."

"Yeah," I agreed.

When I'd been a kid, I was enthralled by sharks. I'd read every book I could find about them, including the most gruesome accounts of shark-related deaths. I'd loved reading about them precisely because they were so dangerous, so deadly, so weird. Epics were the same way, only so much more. Creatures like Regalia—mysterious, dynamic, powerful—were *fascinating*.

"You didn't answer my question," I noted, "about how you know Regalia."

"No," Prof said. "I didn't."

I knew better than to prod further. We soon reached the ruins of a larger city, but we didn't seem to have reached Babilar yet—at least, we hadn't reached the haze of light. This place was pitch-

black, no fires, let alone any electricity. What I'd spotted earlier was beyond it, out a distance—and even that wasn't really "lights." More a faint glow in the air, like might be caused by a lot of lit areas, though I couldn't make out any distinct lights. We were still too far, and the buildings blocked my view.

I took out my rifle and watched the passing landscape through the night-vision scope. Most everything was rusted and crumbling here—though this city was bigger than the others we'd passed on our way. It also looked wrong to me for some reason. So grey, so decayed. So … fake?

Because it looks like the movies, I realized, thinking back to the films I'd watched with the other kids at the Factory. We'd all lived in Newcago, a city of pure steel. Faded signs, brick walls, woodpiles—these were things from another world. The only place I'd seen them before was in the films.

This was what the rest of the world thought was normal. How bizarre.

We drove through this dead city for a long while, still on the expressway, but going at a slow speed. I assumed that Prof didn't want to make any noise. Eventually he pulled onto an off-ramp and drove down into the dark city itself.

"Is this Babilar?" I asked softly.

"No," Prof said. "This is … was … New Jersey. Fort Lee, specifically."

I found myself on edge. Anything could be watching from among those broken husks of buildings. This place was abandoned, an enormous grave for the time that had come before Calamity.

"So empty," I whispered as Prof drove us down a street.

"A lot of people died fighting the Epics," Tia whispered back. "And a lot more died once the Epics started fighting back in earnest. But the most died in the chaos that followed, when civilization just … surrendered."

"A lot of people avoid the cities," Prof said. "Hard to grow anything here, and they attract the worst kind of scavengers. However, the land isn't as empty as you think." He rolled us around a corner. I didn't miss that Tia had a handgun out in her lap, though I'd never seen her fire a weapon before. "Besides," Prof added, "most everyone in this area has made their way to the island by now."

“Life’s better there?” I asked.

“Depends.” He stopped the jeep in the middle of a darkened road, then turned back toward me. “How well do you trust the Epics?”

It seemed a loaded question, considering the source. He climbed out of the jeep, boots scraping on asphalt. Tia got out the other side, and they started walking toward a looming building.

“What’s this?” I asked them, standing up in the back of the jeep. “Where’s the road into Babilar?”

“Can’t drive into Babilar,” Prof said, stopping by the door of the building.

“Too noticeable?” I asked, hopping down and joining them.

“Well, there’s that,” Prof said. “But mostly it’s because the city doesn’t have any streets. Come on. It’s time to meet your new team.”

He pushed open the door.

9

I followed Prof and Tia into the building. It looked like an old mechanic's garage, with large bay doors on the front. And it smelled … too clean. Not musty, like the forgotten chambers of Newcago's understreets. It was pitch-black, though, and creepy. I couldn't make out much besides some large dark shapes that might have been vehicles.

I unslung my rifle, feeling the hair on the back of my neck rising. What if this was some kind of trap? Had Prof prepared for that? I—

Lights came on in a sudden flare. Blinded, I cursed and jumped to the side, slamming my back against something large. I raised my rifle.

"Oops!" a feminine voice said. "Oh, sorry, sorry, sorry! Too bright."

Prof grunted nearby. Rifle stock firmly against my shoulder, I blinked until I could make out that we were in some kind of workshop. We were surrounded by tool-covered benches and a few half-disassembled cars, including one jeep just like our own.

The door clicked closed behind me, and I pointed my rifle that direction. A tall Hispanic woman in her early thirties had shut the door. She had angular features and dark hair with one lock in the front dyed purple. She wore a red shirt and a blazer, with a black necktie.

"Mizzy," the woman snapped, "the point of dimming the lights until they were in was to *avoid* alerting the entire neighborhood that this building has power. That doesn't work if you turn the lights back on while the door is still *wide open*."

"Sorry!" called the voice from before, the sound echoing in the

large room.

The Hispanic woman glanced at me. “Put that gun down before you hurt someone, kid.” She strode past me and gave Prof a sloppy salute.

He extended a hand. “Val.”

“Jon,” Val said, taking his hand. “I was surprised to get your message. I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“Considering what happened,” Prof said, “I figured you’d be planning to do something brash.”

“Here to stop me, sir?” Val asked, voice cold.

“Sparks no,” Prof said. “I’m here to help.”

Val’s expression cracked, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips. She nodded to me. “That’s Steelslayer?”

“Yes,” Prof said as I finally stepped out of my cover.

“Excellent reflexes,” Val said, looking me up and down. “Terrible fashion sense. Mizzy, where the hell are you?”

“Sorry!” that voice from before came again, followed by clanks. “Coming!”

I stepped up beside Tia as I spotted a young black woman climbing down from a catwalk above, a sniper rifle slung over her shoulder. She hit the ground and jogged toward us, a bounce in her step. She wore jeans and a short jacket, with a tight white shirt underneath. She had her hair braided in cornrows on the top, and it exploded into a frizzy puff behind her head.

Tia and Prof looked at Val; Tia cocked an eyebrow.

“Mizzy is quite capable,” Val said. “She’s just a little …”

As Mizzy scuttled toward us, she tried to duck under the front of a half-assembled jeep that was up on risers. However, the rifle over her shoulder stuck up too high, and it clanged against the front of the jeep, pushing her backward. She gasped, grabbing the jeep as if to steady it—though it hadn’t budged. Then she patted it as if in apology.

She was maybe seventeen years old or so, and had a cute face with round features and creamy brown skin. *She smiles too wide to be a refugee*, I thought as she ran over and saluted Prof. *Where has she been living that hasn’t beaten that bubbly nature out of her?* I wondered.

“Where’s Exel?” Tia asked.

“Watching the boat,” Val said.

Prof nodded, then pointed at Val. “David, meet Valentine,

leader of this cell of the Reckoners. She and hers have been living in Babylon Restored for the last two years, doing reconnaissance on Regalia. You obey orders from her as if they came from me. Understand?"

"Got it. Val, are you point?"

Val's expression darkened. "Operations," she said, giving no indication why my words had bothered her. "Though if Tia is going to be joining this crew …"

"I am," Tia said.

"Then," Val said, "she'll probably run operations. I'd rather be in the field anyway. But I don't run point. I do heavy weapons and vehicle support."

Prof nodded, gesturing toward Mizzy. "And this is Missouri Williams, I assume?"

"Excited to meet you, sir!" Mizzy said. She seemed the type to be excited about pretty much everything. "I'm the team's new sniper. Before, I did repairs and equipment, and I have experience with demolitions. I'm training to run point, sir!"

"Like hell you are," Val said. "She's good with a rifle, Prof. Sam had kind of taken her under his wing.…"

Probably the person they lost recently, I thought, reading Prof's stiff expression, Tia's look of sorrow. Sam. I guessed he'd been their point man, the one who shouldered the most danger—interacting with Epics and drawing them into the traps.

It was the job I did in our team. The job Megan had done before she left. I didn't know Sam, but it was hard not to feel a surge of empathy for the fallen man. He'd died fighting back.

But Megan had *not* been responsible, no matter what Prof claimed.

"Glad to have you, Mizzy," Prof said, voice even. I sensed a healthy dose of skepticism in that tone, but that was only because I knew him pretty well. "Go pull our jeep into the garage. David, go with her, scope out just in case."

I raised an eyebrow at him. He returned a flat gaze. *Yes*, the gaze said, *I'm getting rid of you for a few minutes. Deal with it*.

I sighed but followed Mizzy out the side door, turning off the lights on the way. That left the others in the dark, in order to make the opening and closing doors less noticeable.

I got out my new rifle, extending the night-vision scope, and walked with Mizzy toward the jeep. Behind us, one of the garage

doors opened, making almost no noise at all. Inside, by the faint starlight, I saw Prof, Tia, and Val in hushed conversation.

"Sparks," Mizzy said softly, "he's *intimidating*."

"Who?" I asked. "Prof?"

"Yeaaah," she said, reaching the jeep. "Wow. Phaedrus himself. I didn't make *too* much a fool of myself, did I?"

"Um. No?" No more a fool than I had made of myself on several occasions after first meeting Jon. I understood how intimidating he could be.

"Good." She stared at Prof in the darkness, and frowned. Then she turned to me and stuck out a hand. "I'm Mizzy."

"They *just* introduced us."

"I know," she said, "but *I* didn't get to introduce *myself*. You're David Charleston, that guy who killed Steelheart."

"I am," I said, taking her hand hesitantly. This girl was a little weird.

She shook my hand, then pulled in closer to me. "You," she said softly, "are *awesome*. Sparks. Two heroes in one day. I will have to write *this* in my *journal*." She swung into the jeep and started it up. I did a sweep of the area with my rifle, looking to see if we'd been noticed. I didn't see anything, so I backed into the garage, following the jeep Mizzy drove.

I tried not to pay too much attention to the fact that Prof had asked her, and not me, to pull the jeep in. I could totally park a jeep without crashing. Sparks, I didn't even crash going around corners anymore. Most of the time.

Mizzy lowered the garage door and locked up the place. Prof, Tia, and Val ended their clandestine conversation, then Val led us through the back of the shop, down into a tunnel under the streets. I expected to keep walking for a while, but we didn't—only a few minutes later she led us up again, through a trapdoor to the outside.

Here, water lapped against a dock, and a wide river led out of the city into a dark bay. Colorful lights shone distantly on the other side. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. I'd looked at maps before coming, and could guess where we were. This was the Hudson River, and that was old Manhattan over there—Babylon Restored. They had electricity, it seemed, and that was the source of the distant haze of illumination I'd seen earlier. But why were the lights so colorful? And oddly dim?

I squinted, trying to make out details, but the lights were just clusters of specks to me. I followed the team along the docks, and my attention was quickly drawn by the water. Despite living in Newcago, I'd never actually been near a large body of water before. Steelheart had turned enough of Lake Michigan to steel that I'd never been to the coast. Something about those dark depths made me strangely uncomfortable.

Ahead of us at the end of the dock, a flashlight flicked on, illuminating a medium-sized motorboat with an enormous man seated at the back, wearing about five shirts' worth of red flannel. Bearded and curly haired, he waved at us with a smile.

Sparks, this man was large. It was like one lumberjack had eaten another lumberjack, and their powers had combined to form one *really* fat lumberjack. He stood up in the boat as Val hopped on. He shook hands with Prof and Tia, then smiled at me.

"Exel," the man said softly, introducing himself. He paused briefly between the syllables, as if he were saying it "X.L." I wondered which position in the team he'd fulfill. "You're Steelslayer?"

"Yeah," I said, shaking his hand. The darkness, hopefully, covered my embarrassment. First Val, then this guy, referring to me that way. "But you don't really need to call me that."

"It's an honor," Exel said to me, stepping back.

They expected me to climb onto the boat. That shouldn't be a problem, right? I realized I was sweating, but I forced myself to step onto the unsteady vehicle. It rocked a lot more than I'd have wanted—and then rocked even *more* as Mizzy climbed on. Were we really going to cross this enormous river in something so small? I sat down, discomforted. That was a *lot* of water.

"Is this it, sir?" Exel asked once we were all on.

"This is everyone," Prof said, settling himself by the prow of the boat. "Let's move."

Val took the seat at the back next to the small outboard motor. She started it with a soft sputtering sound, and we pulled away from the dock onto the choppy black water.

I held on to the rail tightly, watching the water. All of that blackness beneath us. Who knew what was down there? The waves weren't huge, but they did rock us. Again, I wondered if we shouldn't have something larger. I scooted closer to the middle of the vessel.

“So,” Val said as she steered us along. “Have you prepped the new guy?”

“No,” Prof said.

“Now might be a good time, considering …,” Val said, nodding toward the distant lights.

Prof turned toward me, his form mostly hidden in shadows. The wind ruffled his dark lab coat. I hadn’t completely gotten over the awe I’d felt upon first meeting him. Yes, we were close now, but occasionally it still struck me—this was *Jonathan Phaedrus*, founder of the Reckoners. A man I’d practically worshipped for most of my life.

“The one who rules this city,” he said to me, “is a hydromancer.”

I nodded eagerly. “Rega—” I began.

“Don’t say her name,” Prof interrupted. “What do you know of her abilities?”

“Well,” I said, “supposedly she can send out a projection of herself, so when you see her, it might just be her duplicate. She also has the portfolio of a standard water Epic. She can raise and lower water, control it with her mind, that sort of thing.”

“She can also see out of any open surface of water,” Prof said. “And can hear anything spoken near the water. Do you have any idea of the ramifications of that?”

I glanced at the open water around us. “Right,” I said, shivering.

“At any time,” Exel said from nearby, “she could be watching us. We have to work under that assumption … and that fear.”

“How are you still alive?” I asked. “If she can see so widely …”

“She’s *not* omniscient,” Prof said to me, speaking firmly. “She can only see one place at a time, and it’s not particularly easy for her. She looks into a dish of water she’s holding, and can use it to see out of any surface of water that touches air.”

“Like a witch,” I said. “From the stories.”

“Sure, like that,” Exel said, chuckling. “I doubt she has a cauldron though.”

“Anyway,” Prof said, “her powers are extensive—but they don’t make it easy for her to scan and find things randomly. Something has to draw her attention.”

“It’s why we avoid saying her name,” Val added from the back of the boat. “Unless we’re whispering over the mobile network.”

Prof tapped his earpiece. I turned on my mobile, with voice amplification, and wirelessly connected it to my earpiece.

"Like this," Prof whispered, but it came into my ear loud enough to be heard.

I nodded.

"Right now," he continued, "we are in her power. We float across the open sea. If she knew we were here, she could summon tendrils of water and drag this ship into the depths. In this city, like most others, the Reckoners can exist because we are careful, quiet, and hidden. Don't let the way we've been acting in Newcago make you sloppy here. Understood?"

"Yeah," I said, whispering like he did, trusting that the sensors on my earpiece would pick up my voice and transmit it. "Good thing we'll be out of open water soon, eh?"

Prof turned toward the city and fell silent. We passed something nearby in the water, a large, towering length of steel. I frowned. What was that, and why had it been built into the middle of the river like this? There was another in the distance.

The tops of a suspension bridge's towers, I realized, spotting wires trailing down into the water. The entire bridge had been sunk.

Or … the water had risen.

"Sparks," I whispered. "We're never going to get off the open water, are we? She's sunk the city."

"Yes," Prof said.

I was stunned. I'd heard that Regalia had raised the water level around Manhattan, but this was far beyond what I'd taken that to mean. That bridge had probably once loomed a hundred feet or more above the river; now it was *beneath* the surface, only its support towers visible.

I turned and looked at the water we'd crossed. Now I could see a subtle slope to the water. The water bulged here, and we had to move *up* at an incline to approach Babilar, as if we were climbing a hill of water. How bizarre. As we drew closer to the city itself, I saw that the entire city was indeed sunken. Skyscrapers rose like stone sentries from the waters, the streets having become waterways.

As I took in the strange sight, I realized something even odder. The glowing lights I'd seen on our approach didn't come out of the windows of the skyscrapers; they came from *the walls* of the skyscrapers. Light shone in patches, bright and fluorescent, like

the illumination from an emergency glowstick.

Glowing paint? That was what it seemed to be. I held to the side of the boat, frowning. This was *not* what I had expected. "Where are they getting their electricity?" I asked over the line.

"They aren't," Val said in my ear, whispering but fully audible to me. "There's no electricity in the city other than in our own hidden base."

"But the lights! How do they work?"

Suddenly the sides of our boat began to glow. I jumped, looking down. The glow came on like a dimmed light that slowly gained strength. Blue … *paint*. The side of the boat had been spraypainted. That was what was on the buildings too. Spraypaint … graffiti. In all its various colors, the graffiti was glowing vibrantly, like colored moss.

"How do the lights work?" Val said. "I wish I knew." She slowed the boat, and we sailed between two large buildings. Their tops glowed and, squinting, I made out spraypainted boards rimming the roofs. They shone with vibrant reds, oranges, greens.

"Welcome to Babylon Restored, David," Prof said from the prow. "The world's greatest enigma."

10

VAL cut the motor and handed oars to me, Mizzy, and Exel, keeping one for herself. The four of us took up rowing duty. We floated out from between the two taller buildings and approached a series of much lower structures, their tops only a few feet above the water.

They might have once been small apartment buildings, now submerged except for the uppermost floor or so of each. People lived on the roofs, mostly in tents—vibrant, colorful tents that glowed from the spraypaint casually marking them with symbols and designs. Some of the paintings were beautiful while others displayed no skill whatsoever. I even saw some glows beneath the water—graffiti that had been flooded over. So old spraypaint glowed as well as newer paintings like the ones atop the skyscrapers.

The city was so *alive*. Lines strung between poles hung with drying clothing. Children sat on the sides of the lowest buildings, kicking their legs in the water, watching us pass. A man rowed a small barge past us—it looked like it was constructed out of a bunch of wooden doors lashed together. Each had been spraypainted with circles of different colors.

After the lonely, empty trip here, I was shocked by the sudden sense of overwhelming activity. So many people. Thousands of them in little villages on the roofs of sunken buildings. As we moved farther into the city, I realized that these tents and buildings weren't just shanties or temporary places for transients. It was all too neat, and many of the rooftops had nice, well-made rope bridges strung between them. I was willing to bet that many of these people had been here for years.

“Should we be in the open like this?” I asked, uncomfortable.

“Babilar is a busy city,” Prof said, “particularly at night, when the lights come on. We’d be a lot more conspicuous if we tried to sneak in. Right now we’re just another ship.”

“Can’t use the motor, though,” Exel noted. “Not a lot of people have working motors in the city.”

I nodded, watching some youths paddle past in a glowing canoe. “They look so …”

“Destitute?” Mizzy asked.

“Normal,” I said. “Everyone’s just living their lives.”

In Newcago, you’d never been able to simply *live*. You worked long hours at factories producing weapons for Steelheart to sell. When you were off work you kept your head down, always watching for Enforcement. You jumped when you heard a loud noise, because it could be one of any number of Epics looking for entertainment.

These people laughed, they played in the water, they … lounged. In fact, very few people seemed to be doing anything productive. Perhaps it was the late hour. That was another oddity. It was the middle of the night, but even children were up and about.

We rowed past a larger building, which rose some three stories above the water. Through the broken glass windows I saw what appeared to be *plants*. Growing inside the building.

Fruit glowing a soft yellow-green studded the plants, and their leaves had the same painted look as the petals we’d found on Sourcefield. “What in Calamity is going *on* in this city?” I whispered.

“We have no idea,” Val said. “I’ve been embedded here for over two years—I arrived about six months after Regalia stopped her tyranny and decided to clean the place up.” As she’d indicated earlier, Val didn’t seem to mind saying Regalia’s name, so long as it was whispered to the rest of us via our earpieces.

“I feel like I know less than when I first came,” Val continued. “Yes, plants grow inside the buildings, and seem to need no cultivation, no sunlamps, no human attention at all. The trees produce flowers, fruits, and vegetables in plenty, enough that nobody here wants for food—so long as one of the gang cartels hasn’t monopolized everything.”

“Regalia stopped that,” Mizzy whispered over the line, dipping

her oar into the water. “Things were pretty bad for us here before she came.”

“For ‘us’?” I asked.

“I’m from Manhattan,” Mizzy said, “born and raised. I don’t remember a whole lot of the early days, but I do remember Calamity. The glows came immediately afterward; anything spraypainted—old or new—started glowing. Only spraypaint works though. The plants started growing at the same time—they just grew in the streets back then—and nobody has a good explanation, except to credit Dawnslight.”

“An Epic?” I asked.

“Maybe?” Mizzy said, shrugging. “Some think so. Dawnslight is what they call the person, force, Epic, or whatever who causes all of this. Except the waters, of course. Those came after, when Regalia arrived. Sweeping into the streets, flooding buildings. We lost a lot of people back then.”

“She killed thousands,” Prof continued, voice low. “Then she let the gangs rule for years. It was only recently that she decided to rescue the city. Even now she controls the gangs, though they don’t terrorize. They watch.”

“Yeah,” Val said, looking at a group of people dancing atop a building. Drums banged to a pleasant rhythm. “It’s creepy.”

“Creepy?” Exel asked. “That an Epic wants to do something good for a change? I think what’s happening here is *wonderful*.” He waved affably to some of the people we passed.

They know him, I realized, studying the people who waved back at him. I assumed they didn’t know what he really was, that his being “embedded” here had led to creating some sort of false identity and mingling with the people.

“No, Exel,” Prof said over the line, his voice a harsh whisper. “Regalia is planning something. Her supposed benevolence worries me, particularly since she’s been sending Epics to try to eliminate my team in Newcago. Don’t forget that she also employs the … person who killed Sam.”

Val, Exel, and Mizzy looked to him.

“So is that why you’re here?” Val asked softly. “Are we finally going to bring Regalia down?”

I looked to Prof. He knew Regalia. Personally. I was increasingly certain of it. They’d been friends, perhaps, long ago. I wished I could get more out of him, but this was how Prof was.

Years of secrecy, of running the Reckoners, had taught him to be circumspect.

"Yes," he whispered. "We're here to bring her down. And every Epic allied with her." He looked straight at me, as if daring me to say something about Megan.

I didn't. I needed to know more first.

"Are you sure about this, Prof?" Exel asked. "Maybe Regalia really *has* decided to care for these people. She's been shipping in liquor, distributing it freely. She doesn't let any gangs prevent people from harvesting fruit. Maybe it's an actual attempt to create a utopia. Maybe an Epic has decided to change and be *kind* for once."

Something exploded on a nearby rooftop.

A blossom of fire lit the air, bringing with it screams of terror and pain. People splashed into the waters around us and another explosion followed.

Prof looked at Exel, then shook his head. I stood up, ignoring the exchange. I was so jarred by the explosions that I barely paid attention to how the boat rocked as I stood.

I listened to the distant moans of pain, and looked sharply at the team. "What is it?"

Exel, Val, Mizzy … all looked equally surprised. Whatever this was, it wasn't normal for the city.

"We should go help," I said.

"This isn't Newcago," Tia said. "Didn't you listen to Jon? We need to remain hidden."

Behind us, another explosion sounded, closer. I could feel the blast wave of this one, or I thought I could. I hardened my expression, then stepped to the side of the boat. I wasn't going to just sit here while people died.

I stopped, though, taking in the water that separated me from the nearest building.

"Tia, David is right," Prof finally said over our lines. "We can't let this continue, whatever it is, without seeing if we can help. We'll investigate, but carefully. Val, do people go about armed in the city?"

"It's not unheard of," Val replied.

"Then we can carry. But don't do anything unless I say. Sit down, David. We need you on your oar."

Reluctantly, I sat down and helped paddle us toward the

nearest building. Above us people rushed across bridges, fleeing the explosions, crowding one another in their haste. The rooftop we reached was low enough—less than a single story showing above the water—and as soon as we arrived I was able to hop up, grab the edge, and tow myself over.

Here I could see the scene better. I was on the roof of a large apartment building that had a sister building on the other side. They were shaped the same with only a small gap of water between them. The other rooftop was where the explosions had happened; it was littered with half-burned tents. The living knelt beside charred loved ones. Others groaned in pain, covered in burns. I felt sick.

Prof heaved himself up beside me, then hissed in anger. “Three explosions,” he said softly. “What’s going on?”

“We have to help,” I said, anxious.

Prof knelt silently for a moment.

“Prof …”

“Tia, Exel,” he whispered into the line, “prepare to help the wounded. Take the boat over. Val, David, and I will cross this rooftop and give you cover support from here. Something about this doesn’t look right to me—too much burning, not enough debris. This wasn’t caused by a bomb.”

I nodded. Val climbed up too, then the three of us ran across the rooftop toward the burning one. Tia and the other two maneuvered the boat through the water alongside us.

Prof stopped Val and me beside the rope bridge leading to the next building. People pushed past us, faces ashen, clothing singed. Prof seized the arm of one who didn’t look too wounded. “What was it?” he asked softly.

The man shook his head and broke away. Prof pointed for me to provide fire support, and I knelt down beside a brick chimney, rifle out, covering Tia and Exel as they moved the boat up beside the burning building, then climbed out and onto it, carrying a pack that I assumed had a first-aid kit in it.

I sat, watching as Exel began to bandage the wounded. Tia took out something else, the small device we called the harmsway—the fake box with wires sticking out of it that we claimed healed people. Prof really did the work; he must have gifted some of his ability to Tia before joining me on the rooftop.

Tia would have to use it sparingly, only to bring the worst of

the wounded from the brink of death. Miraculous healing would draw too much attention to us. Sparks. We might draw too much attention anyway. We were obviously organized, armed, and skilled. If we weren't careful, this might very well undermine Exel's and Val's cover stories.

"What about me?" Mizzy asked over the line. The young woman still waited in the boat, which rocked in the dark water near the side of the burning building. "Prof, sir?"

"Watch the boat," he said over the line.

"I …" Mizzy looked deflated. "Yes sir."

I focused on my duty, watching for threats to Tia and Exel on the burning rooftop, but my heart wrenched for the girl. I knew what it was like to feel Prof's skepticism. He could be a hard man. Harder lately. Poor kid.

You're treating her that way too, I realized. *She's probably not even a year younger than you are*. It wasn't fair to think of her as a kid. She was a woman. A pretty one at that.

Focus.

"Ah, here you are, Jonathan. Very prompt of you."

The voice, spoken in a businesslike tone, made me jump almost to the stars. I spun on the source of the sound, leveling my rifle.

An older black woman stood beside Prof. Wrinkled skin, white hair in a bun. Scarf at the neck, fashionable—yet somewhat grandmotherly—white jacket over a blouse and slacks.

Regalia, empress of Manhattan. Standing *right there*.

I planted a bullet in the side of her head.

11

MY shot didn't do much. Well, it made Regalia's head explode, so there was that—but it exploded into a burst of water. Immediately after, more water bulged up out of the neck in a giant bubble and formed into her head again. Color flooded it, and soon she looked exactly as she had a moment before.

Regalia's self-projections were apparently tied to her water manipulation powers. I hadn't realized that, but it made sense.

In order to kill her, we'd have to find her real body, wherever it was. Fortunately, most Epics who created projections had to be in a trance of some sort to do it, which would mean that somewhere she was vulnerable.

Regalia's avatar glanced at me, then turned back to Prof. This was one of the most powerful Epics who had ever lived. Sparks. Hands sweating, heart thumping, I kept my gun on her—for all the good it would do.

"Abigail," Prof said to her, his voice soft.

"Jonathan," Regalia replied.

"What have you done here?" Prof nodded toward the destruction and the injured.

"I needed to draw you out *some* way, dear man." She spoke with elevated diction, like someone from the old movies. "I figured that a rogue Epic would focus your attention."

"And if I hadn't yet arrived in the city?" Prof demanded.

"Then knowledge of the destruction here would pull you faster," Regalia said. "But I was fairly certain you'd be arriving tonight. It was *obvious* that you'd be coming for me, after my last little … calling card arrived in Chicago. I counted the days, and here you are. You are nothing if not predictable, Jonathan."

Another blast of fire lit the night nearby, coming from a different rooftop. I spun, cursing, and pointed my weapon in that direction.

"Oh dear," Regalia said in an emotionless voice. "I guess he *is* going further than my instructions advised."

"He?" Prof said, voice tense.

"Obliteration."

I nearly dropped my gun. "You brought *Obliteration* here? Calamity! What is wrong with you?"

Obliteration was a monster—more a force of nature than a man. He'd left Houston in rubble, murdering Epics and regular people alike. Albuquerque after that. Then San Diego.

Now he was here.

"Abigail …," Prof said, sounding pained.

"You had better stop him," Regalia said. "He's out of control. Oh my. What have I done. How terrible."

The color vanished from her avatar, and it fell, splashing down into water once again. I looked through my scope, surveying the destruction. Some people swam away from the burning rooftops, while others screamed and crowded across bridges. Another flare of light drew my attention, and I caught sight of a figure in black moving among the flames.

"He's there, Prof," I said. "Sparks. She wasn't lying. It's *him*."

Prof cursed. "You've studied the Epics. What's his weakness?"

Obliteration's weakness? I searched frantically, trying to remember what I knew of this man. "I … Obliteration …" I took a deep breath. "High Epic. He's protected by a danger sense tied to his teleportation powers—if anything is going to harm him, he teleports immediately. It's a reflexive power, though he can also use it at will, making him very hard to pin down. This isn't just a minor wall-traveling power like Sourcefield, Prof. This is full-blown instantaneous transportation."

"His *weakness*," Prof prodded as another flare blasted in the night.

"His true weakness is unknown."

"Damn."

"But," I added, "he's nearsighted. That's not related to his powers, but we might be able to exploit it. Also, when he's in danger, his teleportation kicks in and sends him away. That protects him, but it also might be something we can use,

particularly since I think his teleportation powers have a cooldown of some sort."

Prof nodded. "Good job." He tapped his mobile. "Tia?"

"Here."

"Abigail just appeared to me," Prof said. "She's brought Obliteration to the city. He's causing the destruction."

Tia's response was a series of curses over the line.

I glanced at Prof, looking up from the scope of my gun. Though the sky was dark, all of this spraypaint—glowing around me on the bricks, wooden bridges, and tents—lit Prof's face. Were we going to move against Obliteration, or fade away? This was obviously some kind of trap—at the very least, Regalia would be watching to see how we handled ourselves.

The smart thing to do was to run. It's certainly what the Reckoners would have done a year ago, before Steelheart. Prof looked at me, and I could read the conflict in his expression. Could we really leave people to die?

"We're already exposed," I said softly to Prof. "She knows we're here. What would running accomplish?"

He hesitated, then nodded and spoke into the line. "We don't have time for the wounded right now. We have an Epic to bring down. Everyone meet in the center of the first burning rooftop."

A flurry of confirmations crackled over our line. Val and Prof started across the swinging rope bridge toward Tia and Exel, and I followed, nervous as I stepped on the bridge. The planks had been spraypainted alternating neon colors. That only helped highlight the darkness of the water staring up at me from below. As we walked, I took my mobile and zipped it into the shoulder pocket of my jacket—that pocket was supposed to be waterproof. Not that I'd tested it beyond the normal Newcago rains.

The water below reflected the neon lights, and I found myself gripping the rope side of the bridge tightly. Should I mention to Prof that I couldn't swim? I swallowed. Why had my mouth gone so dry?

We reached the other side, and I calmed myself by force. The air here smelled strongly of smoke. We jogged across the rooftop and met up with the others, who had been joined by Mizzy. A nearby tent had been *melted* to the ground; it outlined the bones of those who had been trapped inside, their flesh vaporized in a flash of destruction. I felt nauseous.

“Jon …,” Tia said. “I’m worried. We don’t have enough of a handle on the city or the situation to take on an Epic like Obliteration. We don’t even know his weakness.”

“David says he’s nearsighted,” Prof said, crouching down.

“Well, David is usually right about such things. But I don’t think that’s enough to—”

Another flare of light. I looked up, as did Prof. Obliteration had moved, probably by teleporting, and was now two rooftops away from us.

Screams sounded from that direction.

“Plan?” I asked urgently.

“Flash and bump,” Prof said. It was the name of a maneuver where one team drew the target’s attention while the other team surrounded them. He reached out, taking me by the shoulder.

His hand felt warm, and now that I knew what to look for, I felt a slight tingling. He’d just gifted me some shielding power and some ability to vaporize solid objects. “Tensors won’t be of much use here,” he told me, “as there isn’t much tunneling that we’ll need to do. But keep them handy, just in case.”

I glanced at Exel and Val. They didn’t know Prof was an Epic; apparently I’d be expected to keep up his ruse in front of them. “Right,” I said, feeling a whole lot safer now that I had some of Prof’s shielding on me.

Prof pointed toward a bridge linking this rooftop to the next one. “Cross that bridge, then make your way over toward Obliteration. Figure out a way to distract him and keep his attention. Val, you and I will use the boat—motor on, no use trying to hide from Regalia now—to come up behind Obliteration. We can plan more as we go.”

“Right,” I said. I glanced at Mizzy. “But I should take Mizzy to cover me. Obliteration might come for Tia, and you’ll want someone with more experience covering her.”

Mizzy glanced at me. She deserved a shot at being in on the action—I knew exactly how it felt to be left behind during times like this.

“Good point,” Prof said, jogging off toward the boat. Val ran behind him. “Exel, you’re guarding Tia. David, Mizzy, get moving!”

“Going,” I said, sprinting toward another rope bridge leading to Obliteration’s latest explosions.

Mizzy ran behind me. “Thanks,” she said, sniper rifle over her shoulder. “If I’d gotten stuck on guard duty again, I think I’d have puked.”

“You might want to wait to thank me,” I said, leaping onto the rickety bridge, “until *after* we survive what comes next.”

12

I shoved past fleeing people on the narrow rope bridge, rifle held high over my head. This time I kept my eyes *pointedly* off the water below.

The bridge sloped gently upward, and when I climbed off it I found myself atop a large roof crowded with tents. People huddled inside their makeshift homes or at the periphery of the rooftop. Others fled through waterways below us or across bridges onto other buildings.

Mizzy and I ran across the rooftop. The ground had been spraypainted with a sequence of yellow and green lines that glowed with a phantom light, outlining pathways. Near the middle of the roof we passed a group of people who, strangely, weren't hiding or fleeing.

They were praying.

"Trust Dawnslight!" shouted a woman in their center. "Bringer of life and peace, source of sustenance. Trust in the One Who Dreams!"

Mizzy stopped, staring at them. I cursed and yanked her along after me. Obliteration stood on the next rooftop over.

I could see him easily now, striding among the flames, trench coat flapping behind him. He had a narrow face with long, straight black hair, spectacles, and a goatee. He was the exact sort of person I'd learned to avoid in Newcago, the sort of person who didn't look dangerous until you saw his eyes and realized that something vital was missing in there.

Even for an Epic, this man was a monster. Though he'd originally ruled a city like many top-tier Epics, he'd eventually decided to *destroy* his city completely. Every single person in

Houston. He was an indiscriminant killer. I was beginning to think some Epics might be redeemable, but this man … not a chance.

"Take up position over on that ledge," I said to Mizzy. "Be ready for instructions. You do demolitions for the team?"

"Sure do."

"You have anything on you?"

"Nothing big," she said. "A few brick-oven-blenders."

"A few … What?"

"Oh! Sorry. My own name for—"

"Whatever," I said. "Get them out and be ready." I lowered my rifle and sighted on Obliteration.

He turned to glance at me.

I shot.

He teleported in a burst of light—as if he'd become ceramic and then exploded, shards of his figure spraying outward like a broken vase and scattering along the ground.

Preemptive teleportation. Worked just like I'd read.

Mizzy ran the direction I'd pointed. I knelt, rifle to shoulder, and waited. The rooftop where Obliteration had stood continued to burn. His primary power was heat manipulation. He could drain anything—people included—of heat with a touch, then expel it either in an aura or by touching something else and transferring it.

He'd melted Houston. Literally. He'd spent weeks sitting in the center of town bare-chested like some ancient god, drawing heat out of the air, basking in the sunlight. He'd stored heat up, then released it all at once. I'd seen photos, read the descriptions. Asphalt turned to soup. Buildings burst into flames. Stones melted to magma.

Tens of thousands dead in moments.

Well, from what I remembered of my notes, I should have a little time before he could reappear. He could only use his teleportation powers every few minutes, and—Obliteration appeared beside me.

I felt the heat before I spotted him, and I spun that direction. Sweat prickled on my brow, like I'd stepped up to a trash can fire on a cold night.

I shot him again.

I heard half a curse from his lips as he again exploded into

shards of light. The heat vanished.

"Be careful, David," Tia said in my ear. "If he gathers heat and pops up right next to you, that aura could overcome your Reckoner shield and fry you before you get a chance to shoot."

I nodded, scrambling away from where I'd been before, rifle still to my shoulder and sights lined up. "Tia," I whispered over the line, "do you have access to my notes?"

"I've pulled those up, along with notes from the other lorists."

"Aren't his teleportation powers supposed to have a recharge time?"

"Yes," she said. "At least two minutes before—"

Obliteration popped into existence again, and this time I caught him coming, like light coalescing. I had a bullet heading that way before he'd even completely formed.

Again the teleportation saved him, but I'd known it would. I was just a diversion. In truth, I had no *idea* how we were going to kill him, but at least I could inconvenience him and prevent him from killing innocents.

"My notes are wrong," I said, sweat trickling down the sides of my face. "There's barely a few seconds' delay between his teleports." Sparks. What else had I gotten wrong?

"Jon," Tia said over the line. "We're going to need a plan. Fast."

"I'm thinking of one," Prof answered in a staccato voice, "but we need more information." Across on the other rooftop, where Obliteration had been attacking before teleporting to me, Prof climbed up and took cover behind some rubble. "David, when he ports, does he automatically take everything touching him, or does he have to specifically choose to bring things like his clothing?"

"Not sure," I said. "Information on Obliteration is scant. He—"

I stopped as he appeared beside me, reaching his hand out to touch me. I jumped, swinging around, feeling a wave of heat wash across me.

A gunshot fired, and Obliteration ported just before he touched me. As before, he left a glowing outline hanging for just a second behind him. The figure exploded into fragments that bounced off me, then vaporized to nothing.

As the flash of light faded from my eyes, I saw Prof on the other rooftop lowering his rifle. "Stay alert, son," Prof said over

the line, voice tense. “Mizzy, get some explosives ready. David, is there anything else—anything at all—you can remember about him or his powers?”

I shook myself. Prof’s energy shield had probably saved me from Obliteration’s heat. He’d just saved my life twice over, then. “No,” I said, feeling useless. “Sorry.”

We waited, but Obliteration didn’t reappear. Instead I heard screams in the distance. Prof cursed over the line and gestured for me to follow the sounds, and I did, heart thumping—yet it was accompanied by the strange calm that comes with being in the middle of an operation.

I passed abandoned tents on one side, people swimming in the waters nearby on the other side. Following the screams led me to a taller building. Thick with vegetation glowing inside the broken windows, the building rose some ten stories or more above the surface of the water. Light flashed inside one of those upper stories, and I saw Obliteration pass in front of an opening. I sighted on him with my rifle and saw that he was smiling, as if in challenge. I fired, but he’d already stepped out of sight deeper into the building.

People continued to scream from inside. Obliteration knew he didn’t have to come to us; we’d go to him.

“I’m going in,” I said, jogging toward a rope bridge that ran to the taller building.

“Be careful,” Prof said. I could see him moving onto his own bridge, heading the same way. “Mizzy, can you cook up a mother switch on something dangerous?”

“Uh … I think so.…”

Mother switch, short for “mother and child.” A bomb that would stay dormant as long as it was receiving a regular radio signal. When the signal stopped, the bomb went off. Kind of like an electronic dead-man’s switch.

“Clever,” I whispered, crossing the rickety bridge in the night, dark water beneath me. “Stick the bomb to him, make him port with it. Blow him up wherever he goes.”

“Yeah,” Prof said. “Assuming that works. He takes his clothing, so he can obviously teleport objects he’s carrying. But is it automatic, or can he consciously choose?”

“I’m not convinced we can even stick something to him,” Tia said. “His danger sense might trigger a teleportation if you even

reach for him."

It was a good point.

"You have a better plan?" Prof asked.

"No," Tia said. "Mizzy, make it happen."

"Got it."

"Work on an extraction plan, Tia," Prof said. "Just in case."

I gritted my teeth, still on the bridge. Sparks. It was impossible to ignore that water down there. I moved more quickly, eager to reach the building, where at least the sea would be out of sight. The bridge didn't lead to the rooftop, but to an old broken window on the story where I'd seen Obliteration.

I reached the window and crouched down before going in, careful of the profile I'd present. Just inside, glowing fruit bobbed from branches and flowers drooped, the petals colored like swirled paint. It was a full-on *jungle* in there; the gloom of shadowed branches and phantom fruit cast an eerie light. Discomforting, like finding a three-week-old sandwich behind your bed, when you swore you'd finished the darn thing.

I checked over my shoulder. Mizzy had moved into position at the other side of the bridge to give me fire support, but her head was down over her pack as she got the explosives ready.

I turned back and, rifle at my shoulder, stepped through the window and checked to each side with a quick motion, looking through my scope. Vines hung from the ceiling and ferns sprouted up from the floor, displacing the carpeting of what had once been a nice office building. Desks—barely visible through it all—had become flowerbeds. Computer monitors were overgrown with moss. The air was thick with humidity, like the understreets after rain. Those glowing fruits were barely enough to illuminate the place, so I moved through a world of rustling shadows as I poked forward, making my way toward where I'd last heard screams—though those had stopped now.

I soon emerged into a small clearing with burned tents and a few smoking corpses. Obliteration was nowhere in sight. *He chose this place intentionally*, I thought, scanning the room with my rifle against my cheek. *We won't be able to back each other up in here, and we'll give our locations away by all the sound we'll make*.

Sparks. I hadn't expected Obliteration to be this clever. I preferred the image of him that I had in my head, that of the raging, mindless monster.

“Prof?” I whispered.

“I’m in,” he said over the line. “Where are you?”

“Near where he attacked,” I said, steeling myself against the sight of the corpses. “He’s not here anymore.”

“Come my way,” Prof said. “We’ll move in together. It would be too easy to take us if we’re separated.”

“Right.” I moved back to the outer wall and edged along toward where Prof’s bridge would intersect the building. I tried to move quietly, but growing up in a city made of steel doesn’t exactly prepare you for things like leaves and twigs. Nature kept crunching or squishing unexpectedly under my feet.

A crack sounded just behind me. I spun on it, heart thumping, and caught sight of fronds rustling. Something had been back there. Obliteration?

He’d have killed you immediately, I thought. So what had it been? A bird? No, too large. Maybe one of the Babilarans who lived in this jungle?

What a *creepy* place. I resumed my progress, trying to look in every direction at once, moving steadily right up until the moment I heard Prof curse over the line.

Gunfire followed.

I ran then. It was probably a stupid move—I should have found cover. Prof knew my direction, and would avoid firing that way, but all kinds of crazy ricochets could happen in an enclosed space like this.

I charged anyway, bursting out into another clearing to find Prof kneeling beside the wall, bleeding from one shoulder. Dust rained down—the ceiling bulged with vines breaking through the plaster—where a stray bullet had hit. Nearby, shards of light evaporated on the ground, vanishing. Obliteration had teleported away just before I arrived.

I put my back to Prof, looking out into the dark jungle. “He has a gun?” I asked.

“No,” Prof said. “A sword. The slontze is carrying around a bloody *sword*.”

I covered us while Prof tied on a bandage. He could use his Epic powers to heal himself, but every use of his powers would push him toward darkness. In the past he had offset that by using only a smidge of power to heal from wounds, accelerating the process but not bringing him too much darkness. He could handle

a little bit at a time.

"Guys," Val's voice cut in, "I'm setting up infrared surveillance of the building. I should have intel for you soon."

"You all right, Jon?" Tia asked.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Fighting in this place is crazy. We're likely to shoot one another in here. Mizzy, how's that bomb?"

"Ready, sir."

Prof stood and steadied his rifle against his good shoulder, the one Obliteration hadn't stabbed with his sword. Prof didn't often carry a gun. In fact, he didn't often go on point. I now knew that being in the field risked forcing him to use his powers to save himself.

"David," he said to me, "go fetch the bomb."

"I don't want to leave you in he—"

"Regalia says that you actually killed Steelheart."

We both froze. The voice had come from the darkness of the forest. A wind blew through one of the windows, rustling leaves.

"That is well," the voice continued. "Someday, I presume, I would have needed to fight him myself. You have removed that obstacle from my path. For that, I bless you."

Prof gestured curtly to the side with two fingers. I nodded, moving that direction. We needed to be close enough to cover one another, but far enough apart that Obliteration couldn't pop in near the two of us and potentially fry us both with one burst. I didn't know how long Prof's shields would hold up against Obliteration's heat, and I wasn't exactly eager to find out firsthand.

"I have told Regalia," Obliteration continued, "that I will kill her someday too. She doesn't seem to mind."

Where *was* that voice coming from? I thought I saw a shadow move near a tree that bulged with glowing fruit.

"Guys," Val said into our ears, "he's there, right in front of David. I can pick out his heat signature."

Obliteration stepped out of the shadows. He touched a tree and it frosted over, the leaves shriveling. The entire thing died in an eyeblink as Obliteration absorbed its heat.

This time, I didn't shoot him. I took a chance and shot at the ceiling.

Dust rained down.

Prof fired also. *He* shot at the ground near Obliteration's feet.

The Epic looked at us, dumbfounded, then thrust out his hand, palm first.

A shot through the window whizzed over my shoulder and took Obliteration in the forehead—or the glowing outline of his forehead, as he vanished. I glanced back through the window. Mizzy waved distantly from her position on a nearby rooftop, holding her sniper rifle.

"What was that about?" Prof demanded. "Missing like that."

"Dust from the ceiling," I said. "It fell all over him, covering his shoulders. Tia, if you run my video feed, you might be able to tell if the dust ported with him when he vanished. That will answer your bomb question, Prof—whether he teleports with objects automatically, or if he has to choose."

He grunted. "Clever."

"And your shots at his feet?" I asked.

"Wanted to see if his danger sense triggered when he *thought* he was in danger, or if it triggered when he was *actually* in danger. He didn't port when I wasn't trying to hit him."

I grinned across the room at Prof.

"Yes," he said, "we're very similar. Go get Mizzy's bomb, you slontze."

"Yes sir." I scanned the room one more time, then ducked out the window, with Prof covering me. We'd moved away from the bridges, however, which put me on a wide ledge suspended ten or so feet above the water.

I looked down at those dark waters, stomach lurching, then forced myself to edge along until I got to a bridge. The nearby rooftops had become a ghost town. The people had all fled, leaving only smoldering tents and glowing paint.

I reached the bridge and crossed quickly, taking cover beside Mizzy. She handed me a glove, which I put on. That was followed by an innocent-looking package, square, roughly the size of a fist.

"Don't drop it," Mizzy said.

"Right." Dropping explosives: bad.

"Not for the reason you think," Mizzy said. "It's coated with adhesive. The glove is no-stick, but anything else that touches the bomb will stick to it—including our bad guy."

"Sounds viable."

"I've got the mother signal; don't get more than three or four rooftops from me."

“Right.”

“Good luck. Don’t blow yourself up.”

“Like I’d blow myself up. Again.”

She looked up at me. “Again?”

“Long story.” I shot her a grin. “Cover me as I head back.”

“Wait a second,” she said, pointing. “I’ve got a better vantage from the next building over.”

I nodded and she started scuttling that way across a *very* precarious rope bridge. I turned back toward the building where Prof was, the one with the jungle inside. Using my scope and its night vision—which was kind of hard to do one-handed—I scanned the area.

There was no sign of him or of Obliteration. Hopefully Prof wasn’t hurt.

He’s practically immortal, I reminded myself. *It’s not him that you have to worry about.*

I looked back over my shoulder and saw Mizzy reach the other end of her bridge—and then I heard screaming. From the building where Mizzy had just arrived.

“David,” Mizzy’s voice said in my earpiece. “There’s something going on here. I’ll be right back.” She disappeared from view.

“Wait, Mizzy—” I said. I stood up.

And found Obliteration standing beside me.

13

I raised my rifle one-handed, but Obliteration slapped it aside and grabbed me by the throat. He lifted me off the ground by my neck.

Sparks! He had enhanced strength. None of my profiles mentioned that either. I was so panicked I didn't even feel pain—just terror.

Despite that, I managed to reach out and slap Mizzy's bomb onto Obliteration's chest. He didn't vanish. He just looked down as if curious.

I struggled in his grasp, growing more frantic as he choked me. I pried at his fingers in a fruitless attempt at escape as Obliteration casually kicked my gun away across the rooftop, then pulled my earpiece out of my ear and dropped it. He felt at my jacket pockets until he found the mobile there, then squeezed it between two fingers.

I heard it crack inside my pocket. I thrashed and writhed more frantically, gasping for air. Where was Mizzy? She was supposed to be watching my back. Sparks! Prof would still be inside the jungle, hunting Obliteration, Val supporting him. If I couldn't reach Tia on the mobile …

I had to save myself. *Make him vanish*, I thought. *The bomb will go off*. I punched at his head.

He ignored my weak battering. "So you're the one," he said, thoughtful. "She spoke of you. Did you really kill him? A youth, not yet a man?"

He let go of me. I dropped to my knees on the rooftop, my neck burning as I inhaled a ragged gasp of air.

Obliteration squatted down beside me.

Plaster dust on his shoulders, a piece of me thought. *When he ports, he takes things that are touching him along*. That spoke well for the bomb.

"Well?" he asked. "Answer me, little one."

"Yes," I gasped. "I killed him. I'll kill you too."

Obliteration smiled. "Behold also the ships," he whispered, "which though they be so great, yet are they turned about with a very small helm.… Do not sorrow for this end of days, little one. Make your peace with your maker. Today, you embrace the light."

He took hold of the shirt under his trench coat, then ripped it off—bomb included—and tossed it away. Strangely, underneath he had a bandage wrapped around his chest, as if he had recently survived some severe wound.

I didn't have time to think about that. Sparks! My hand darted toward Megan's gun, but Obliteration grabbed me by the arm and hoisted me into the air.

The world spun around me, yet I was lucid enough to notice when he held me out over the waters. I looked down at them, then struggled more frantically.

"You fear the depths, do you?" Obliteration asked. "The home of leviathan himself? Well, each man must face his fears, killer of gods. I would not send you to the undiscovered country unprepared. Thank you for slaying Steelheart. Surely your reward will be great."

Then he dropped me.

I hit the black waters with a splash.

I thrashed in that cool darkness, weak from near strangulation, not knowing which way was up. Fortunately, I managed to cling to consciousness and surface in a sputtering mess. I grabbed hold of the building's brickwork, then—breath coming in desperate wheezes—I began to climb toward the roof, which was about half a story up.

Exhausted, water streaming from my clothing, I flung an arm over the edge of the rooftop. Blessedly, Obliteration had moved on. I lifted a leg over the side, hauling myself up. Why would he drop me, then—

A flash of light beside me. Obliteration. He knelt down, something metal in his hands. A manacle? With a chain attached to it?

A ball and chain, like from the old days—the type prisoners would wear. Sparks! What kind of person had one of those handy, ready to go grab? He clasped it onto my ankle.

"You have a shield to protect you from my heat," Obliteration said. "So you are prepared for that. But not for this, I suspect."

He kicked the iron ball over the side of the roof.

I grunted as the ball fell, the weight wrenching my leg in its socket, threatening to tow me off the rooftop. I clung to the stonework ledge. How to escape? No rifle, no bomb. I had Megan's pistol in my thigh holster, but if I let go of the rooftop to grab it, that iron ball would pull me into the water. I panicked, grunting, fingers slipping on the stonework of the roof.

Obliteration bent down, close to my face. "And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven," he whispered, "having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain.…"

At that he brought his hands up and shoved my shoulders, prying me off the rooftop. My fingernails tore and my skin scraped on the bricks as I fell. I splashed down again, this time with a great weight towing on my leg—like the dark waters were actively seeking to engulf me.

I flailed as I sank, searching for anything to stop my descent, and caught hold of a submerged window ledge.

Darkness all around me.

I clung to it as a flash of light shone above. Obliteration leaving? The surface seemed so far away, though it couldn't have been more than five feet.

Darkness. Darkness all around!

I hung on, but my arms were weak and my chest bursting for breath. My vision darkened. Terrified, I felt like the waters were crushing me.

That awful deep blackness.

I couldn't breathe.… I was going to …

No!

I summoned a burst of strength and thrust my hand upward to grab a brick ledge higher on the side of the building. I heaved myself toward the surface, but in the darkness of night I didn't even know how far away from the air I was. The weight beneath me was too strong. The blackness encircled me.

My fingers slipped.

Something splashed into the water beside me. I felt something

brush me—fingers on my leg.

The weight vanished.

I didn't spare time to think. I pulled myself upward along the submerged building with the last of my strength and burst into the open air, gasping. For a long moment I clung to the side of the building, breathing deeply, shaking, unable to think or really do anything but revel in oxygen.

Finally, I pulled myself up the five feet or so onto the rooftop. I got a leg over the side and rolled onto the stonework, lying on my back, utterly spent. I was too weak to so much as stand, let alone fetch my gun, so it was a good thing Obliteration didn't return.

I lay there for some time. I'm not sure how long. Eventually something scraped on the rooftop nearby. Footsteps?

"David? Oh, sparks!"

I opened my eyes and found Tia kneeling over me. Exel stood back a few feet, looking about anxiously, assault rifle in his hands.

"What happened?" Tia asked.

"Obliteration," I said, coughing. With her help, I sat up. "Dumped me in the water with a chain on my leg. I …" I trailed off, staring at my leg. "Who saved me?"

"Saved you?"

I looked at the still waters. Nobody had surfaced after me, had they? "Was it Mizzy?"

"Mizzy is with us," Tia said, helping me to my feet. "I don't know what you're talking about. You can brief us later."

"What happened to Obliteration?" I asked.

"Gone, for now," Tia said.

"How?"

"Jon …" She trailed off, meeting my gaze. She didn't say it, but I read the meaning.

Prof had used his powers.

Tia nodded toward the boat, which rocked in the water nearby. Mizzy and Val sat in it, but there was no sign of Prof.

"Just a sec." I fetched my gun, still dizzy from my ordeal. Near it I found Mizzy's discarded explosives, which were still attached to the front of the T-shirt that Obliteration had been wearing. It wouldn't explode unless it got too far from the radio signal. I rolled the bomb in the remains of the shirt and made my way over to the small boat. Exel offered me a hand, helping me down

into the craft.

I settled next to Mizzy, who glanced at me and then immediately looked down. It was hard to tell with her darker skin, but I thought she was blushing in embarrassment. Why hadn't she watched my back like she'd said she would?

Val started the small motor. It seemed she didn't care about drawing attention any longer. Regalia had located us, appeared to us. Hiding was pointless.

So much for keeping quiet, I thought.

As we motored away from the scene of the fight, I noticed people beginning to peek out of hiding places. Wide-eyed, they emerged to broken tents and smoldering rooftops. This was only one small section of the city, and the destruction wasn't wholesale—but I still felt we'd failed. Yes, we'd driven off Obliteration, but only temporarily, and we'd managed it only by falling back on Prof's abilities.

What I couldn't figure out was, how had he done it? How could forcefields or disintegrating metal stave off Obliteration?

Judging by the slumped postures the others wore, they felt the same way I did—that we'd failed tonight. We motored past the broken rooftops in silence. I found myself watching the people who'd gathered. Most seemed to ignore us—in the chaos, they had probably taken cover and missed a lot of the details. You learned to keep your head down when Epics were near. To them, we'd hopefully appear to be just another group of refugees.

I did catch some of them watching us go, though. An older woman, who held a child to her chest, nodding with what seemed to be respect. A youth who peeked over the edge of a rooftop near a burned bridge, wary, as if he expected Obliteration to appear at any moment to destroy us for daring to stand up to him. A young woman wearing a red jacket with the hood up, watching from among a small crowd, her clothing wet …

Wet clothing. I focused immediately, and caught a glimpse of her face beneath the hood as she looked at me.

Megan.

She held my gaze for just a moment. It was Megan … *Firefight*. A second later, she turned and vanished into the group of townspeople, lost in the night.

So you are *here*, I thought, remembering the splash, the feel of someone's hands on my leg in the moments before I was freed.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“What was that?” Tia asked.

“Nothing,” I said, settling back in the boat and smiling, despite my exhaustion.

14

WE continued on through the darkness, moving into a section of the city that was obviously less inhabited. Buildings still sprouted from the waters like tiny islands, fruit glowing on their upper floors, but the spraypaint colors were faded or nonexistent and no bridges linked the structures. They were probably too far apart out here.

The area grew darker as we left the parts of the city with the bright spraypaint. Sailing across those waters in the blackness of night, only the moon to give us light, was thoroughly unsettling. Fortunately, Val and Exel turned on their mobiles, and together the glow created a bright enough light to give us some illumination.

"So, Missouri," Val said from the back of the boat. "Would you mind explaining why you let David be attacked—and nearly killed—alone, without any backup?"

Mizzy stared at the boat's floor. The motor puttered quietly behind us. "I …," she finally said. "There was a fire inside the building I was on. I heard people screaming. I tried to help.…"

"You should know better than that," Val said. "You keep telling me you want to learn to take point—then you do something like this."

"Sorry," the young woman said, sounding miserable.

"Did you save them?" I asked.

Mizzy looked up at me.

"The people in the building," I added. Sparks, my neck was sore. I tried not to show the pain, or my exhaustion, as Mizzy regarded me.

"Yeah," Mizzy said. "They didn't need much saving, though. All

I did was unlock a door. They'd gone inside to hide, and the fires had burned down to their floor."

"Nice," I said.

Tia glanced at me. "She shouldn't have abandoned her post."

"I'm not saying she should have, Tia," I replied, meeting her gaze. "But let's be honest. I'm not certain *I* could have let a bunch of people burn to death." I glanced at Mizzy. "It was probably the wrong thing to do, but I'll bet those people are glad you did it anyway. And I managed to squeak by, so it all turned out all right. Nice work." I held out my fist for a bump.

She returned the bump hesitantly, smiling.

Tia sighed. "It is our burden to sometimes make difficult choices. Risking the plan to save one life may cause the deaths of hundreds. Remember that, both of you."

"Sure," I said. "But shouldn't we be talking about what just happened? Two of the most powerful and most arrogant Epics in the world are working together. How in Calamity's name did Regalia manage to recruit *Obliteration* of all people?"

"It was easy," Regalia said. "I offered to let him destroy my city."

I jumped, scrambling away from the Epic, who was forming out of water beside the boat. The liquid melded into her shape, taking on her coloring, and she settled with one foot up on the rim of the boat, hands folded in her lap, the other foot still merging with the surface beside the boat.

She had an elegant, matronly look about her—like a kindly grandmother who had dressed up to visit the big city. A city she was apparently planning to destroy. She looked us over, and though I clutched my rifle, I didn't shoot. She was a projection, a creation of water. The real Regalia could have been anywhere.

No, I thought. *Not anywhere*. Projection powers like hers usually had very limited ranges.

Regalia inspected us, her lips downturned. She seemed confused by something.

"What are you up to, Abigail?" Tia demanded.

So you know her too, I thought, glancing at Tia.

"I just told you," Regalia said. "I'm going to destroy the city."

"Why?"

"Because, dear. It's what we *do*." Regalia shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can no longer help myself."

“Oh please,” Tia said. “You expect me to believe that you, of all Epics, are out of control? What is your *real* motive? Why have you drawn us here?”

“I said—”

“No games, Abigail,” Tia snapped. “I don’t have the patience for it tonight. If you’re going to spin lies, just leave right now and spare me the headache.”

Regalia bowed her head quietly for a moment, then she slowly stood up, moving deliberately, carefully. She perched on the rim of the small boat, and I saw a hint of translucence to her—the water that made up her likeness showing through.

The sea around our boat began to churn and bubble.

“What,” Regalia said softly, “do you take me for?”

Tentacles made of water broke the surface around us. Exel cursed, and I spun, flipping my rifle to fully automatic and unloading a spray of bullets into the nearest tendril. It splashed water, but didn’t stop moving.

The tentacles of water moved in around us, like the fingers of some enormous beast from below. One seized me by the neck, and another snaked forward and wrapped my wrist in a cold, incongruously solid grip.

The others shouted and scrambled as each of us was snatched in turn. Exel unloaded his handgun at Regalia before being picked up and lifted, like a bearded balloon, in a ropy length of water.

“You think me some minor Epic to be trifled with?” Regalia asked softly. “You mistake me for someone of whom you can make demands?”

I thrashed in my bonds as the entire *boat* was lifted by the tentacles, and the outboard motor’s pitch rose to a whine and was then silenced as some kind of kill switch engaged. Spouts of water curled up around us, forming bars, cutting us off from the sky.

“I could snap your necks like twigs,” Regalia said. “I could tow this boat down into the deepest depths and imprison it there, so that even your corpses never again see the light. This city belongs to me. The lives of those here are *mine to claim*.”

I twisted to look at her. My earlier assessment—that she seemed grandmotherly—now felt laughable. Lengths of water wrapped around her as she loomed over us, her eyes wide, lips curled into a sneer. Her arms were out before her, clawlike hands

controlling the water like some crazed puppet master. This was not some kindly matron; this was a High Epic in all her glory.

I didn't doubt for a moment that she could do exactly as she said she could. Heart beating quickly, I glanced at Tia.

Who was perfectly calm.

It was easy to dismiss Tia as one of the less dangerous Reckoners. At that moment, however, she didn't show a hint of fear, despite being wrapped in Regalia's tendril of water. Tia met the High Epic's gaze while gripping something in her hand; it looked like a water bottle with something white inside.

"You think I'm afraid of your little tricks?" Regalia demanded.

"No," Tia said. "But I'm pretty sure you're afraid of Jonathan."

The two stared one another down for a moment. Then suddenly the water tendrils fell, dropping us to the boat, which splashed down into the water. I hit hard, grunting, as water soaked me.

Regalia sighed softly, lowering her arms. "Tell Jonathan that I tire of men and their meaningless lives. I have listened to Obliteration, and I agree with him. I will destroy everyone in Babylon Restored. I do not know … how long I can hold back. That is all."

Abruptly she vanished, her figure becoming water that collapsed back to the ocean surface. I found myself huddled between Val and Exel, heart thumping. The sea stilled around our ship.

Tia wiped water from her eyes. "Val, get us to the base. Now."

Valentine scrambled to the back of the boat and started up the motor.

"What's the point of hiding?" I asked softly as we began moving again. "She can look anywhere, be anywhere."

"Regalia is *not* omniscient," Tia said. She seemed as intent on pointing that fact out as Prof had been earlier. "Did you see how confused she was when she appeared here? She thought Jon would be with us, and was surprised that he wasn't."

"Yeah," Exel said, extending his hand and helping me right myself. His bulk took up about three seats' worth of space just in front of me. "We've been able to hide from her for almost two years … at least we think."

"Tia," Val said warningly, "things just changed in the city. She saw us. From now on, everything will be different. I'm not certain I trust anything in Babilar anymore."

Exel nodded, looking worried, and I remembered what he'd said earlier. *At any time, she could be watching us. We have to work under that assumption … and that fear*. Well, we knew she was watching now.

"She is *not* omniscient," Tia repeated. "She can't see inside buildings, for example, unless there is a pool of water inside for her to peer out of."

"But if we enter a building and don't come out," I said, "that'll be a dead giveaway to her that our base is inside."

The others said nothing. I sighed, settling back. The confrontation with Regalia had obviously left them disturbed. Well, I could understand that. Why did their silence have to extend to me, though?

Val guided the boat toward a building that was missing a large section of outer wall. The structure was one of the enormous office buildings that were common here in Babilar, and so a gap wide enough to drive a bus through made up only a fraction of its wall space. Val guided our boat right in, and Exel took out a long hook and used it to unlatch something on the side of the wall. A large set of black drapes fell over the hole and blocked out the world.

Val and Exel clicked their mobiles on, lighting the half-sunken chamber with a pale white glow. Val guided the boat to the side of the room, near a set of stairs, and I moved to disembark and climb them—eager to be off the boat. Tia took me by the arm, however, and shook her head.

Instead she got out that water bottle she'd held earlier, the one with something white inside. She shook it, then upended it into the water. The others dug similar bottles out of a trunk in the bottom of the boat, then dumped theirs out as well. Mizzy dumped an entire cooler of the stuff into the water.

"Soap?" I asked when I saw the suds.

"Dish soap," Val confirmed. "Changes the surface tension of the water, makes it almost impossible for *her* to control it."

"Also warps her view out," Exel said.

"That's awesome," I said. "Her weakness?"

"Not so far as we know," Mizzy said eagerly. "Just an effect on her powers. It's more like how dumping a lot of water on a fire Epic might make their abilities sputter. But it's reeeaaal useful."

"Useful, but perhaps meaningless," Val said, shaking out the

last of her bottle of soap. “In the past we’ve used this as a precaution only. Tia, she’s *seen* us. I’m sure she identified every one of us.”

“We’ll deal with it,” Tia said.

“But—”

“Lights out,” Tia said.

Val, Mizzy, and Exel shared a look. Then they clicked off their mobiles, plunging the place into darkness. This seemed another good precaution—if Regalia could look into the room, all she’d see was blackness.

Our boat rocked, and I grabbed Mizzy by the arm, worried. Something seemed to be happening in the room. Water streaming from somewhere? Sparks! Was the building sinking? Worse, had Regalia found us?

It stopped, yet the stillness was, for a second, even more unsettling. Heart thumping, I imagined I was back in that water with the chain on my leg. Sinking toward the depths.

Mizzy pulled on my arm. She was stepping out of the boat, but in the wrong direction. *Into* the water. But—

I heard her foot hit something solid. What? I allowed myself to be led out of the boat, and I stepped on something metal and slick. Had I gotten turned around? No, we were walking on something that had risen out of the water in the room here. A platform?

As we reached a hatch, and I felt my way to a ladder downward, it suddenly struck me. Not a platform.

A submarine.

15

I hesitated, standing in the darkness, holding the ladder leading down into the sub I couldn't yet see.

I hadn't realized that this whole "water" thing was going to be an issue for me. I mean … half the world is water, right? And we're all half water to boot. So stepping into the sub should have felt like a sheep falling into a big pile of cotton.

Only it didn't. It felt like a sheep falling into a pile of nails. Wet nails. On the bottom of the ocean.

I wasn't about to let the other Reckoners see me sweat, though. Even if they couldn't see me in the darkness. Hear me sweat? Ew. Anyway, I swallowed and climbed down into the submarine by touch. Exel's heavy footfalls followed last. Something thumped above us, and I assumed he was twisting the hatch closed, sealing it.

It was as black as charcoal at midnight inside. Or, well, as black as a grape at midnight—or pretty much anything at midnight. I felt my way to a seat as the machine started to putter, then sank down quietly.

"Here," Mizzy said, forcing something into my hand. A towel. "Wipe up any water you might have tracked in."

Glad to have something to do, I wiped my seat down, then the floor, which was carpeted. Another towel followed, and I dried myself as best I could. Obviously, hiding from Regalia required making certain that no open surfaces of water were around.

"Okay?" Mizzy asked a few minutes later.

"We're good," Val replied.

Mizzy turned on her mobile, bathing us in light, letting me see the chamber around us. It was lined on both sides with plush

orange and blue vinyl benches under windows that had been covered with heavy black cloth. I realized that, unlike what I'd expected, this wasn't a military submarine. It was some kind of sightseeing vehicle, like one that might take people on tours around a reef. The carpet on the floor had obviously been installed later to help keep pools of liquid from forming.

Exel sat at the ready, watching for any puddles we'd missed in the darkness. "Regalia supposedly needs two inches or so to look through," he said to me, "but we prefer not to take chances."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "Can't she just look under the waves and find us?"

"No," Tia said. She'd settled into the last seat in the sub, near what appeared to be a restroom hung with a sign reading, MIZZY'S EXPLOSIVE BUNKER. ENTER AT PEACE. EXIT IN PIECES. The latch was broken, and the door kept swinging open and closed.

"Imagine you're contacting me via your mobile," Tia continued. "My face appears on your screen, and yours appears on mine. Could you instead, if you wanted to, turn your perspective around and look *inside* my mobile?"

"Of course not."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't work that way," I said. "The screen faces outward."

"That's how her abilities work," Tia said. "A surface of water exposed to the air is like a screen for her, and she can look out of it. She can't just look the other direction. Under the surface, we're invisible to her."

"We're still in her power," Val pointed out from the driver's seat up ahead. "She raised water to flood all of Manhattan—reaching down to rip apart this submarine would be nothing to her. In the past, we counted on her not knowing we were down here."

"She could have killed us in the boat above," Tia said. "She let us go instead, which means that for now she doesn't want us dead. Now that we're under the surface, she won't know where to look for us. We're free, for the moment."

Everyone seemed to accept this. At the very least, there wasn't much point in arguing. As we sailed—or whatever you did in a submarine—onward, I relocated to a seat just beside Tia.

"You know a lot about her powers," I said softly.

“I’ll give you a briefing later,” she said.

“Will that briefing include *how* you know all of this?”

“I’ll let Jon decide what needs to be shared,” she answered, then rose and moved to the front of the vehicle to speak quietly with Val.

I sat back and tried not to think about the fact that we were underwater. We probably couldn’t go very deep—this was a recreational craft—but that didn’t bring me much comfort. What happened if something went wrong? If this sub started leaking? If it just stopped moving and sank down to sit on the bottom of the ocean floor here, with us all trapped inside …

I shifted uncomfortably, and my pocket crinkled. I grimaced, reaching in and pulling out my mobile. What was left of it at least.

“Wow,” Exel said, settling down next to me. “How’d you do *that*?”

“Angered an Epic,” I said.

“Give it to Mizzy,” he said, nodding toward the girl. “She’ll either fix it or get you a new one. Be warned, though: whatever she gives you might come with some … modifications.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“All *good* and *very useful* additions,” Mizzy said. She’d taken the bomb from me and was disarming it in her seat.

“So,” I said, turning to Exel, “Mizzy is repairs and equipment —”

“And point,” she said.

“—and other things,” I continued. “Val is operations and support. I’ve been trying to place your job in the team. You’re not point. What do you do?”

Exel put his feet up on the seat across from him, leaning with his back to the covered window. “Mostly I do the stuff that Val doesn’t want to do—such as talking to people.”

“I talk to people,” Val snapped from the driver’s seat ahead.

“You yell at them, dear,” Exel said.

“It’s a form of talking. Besides, I don’t *only* yell.”

“Yes, you occasionally grumble.” Exel smiled at me. “We’ve been a deeply embedded team, Steelslayer. That means lots of observation and interaction with the people in the city.”

I nodded. The large man had a disarming way about him, with those rosy cheeks and that thick brown beard. Cheerful, friendly.

"I'll also bury your corpse," he noted to me.

Ooookaaaay …

"You'll look good in the coffin," he said. "Nice skeletal structure, lean body. A bit of cotton under the eyelids, some embalming fluid in the veins, and poof—you'll be done. Too bad your skin is so pale, though. You'll show bruises really easily. Nothing a little makeup can't solve, eh?"

"Exel?" Val called from the front.

"Yes, Val?"

"Stop being creepy."

"It's not creepy," he said. "Everyone dies, Val. Ignoring the fact won't make it not true!"

I took the opportunity to scoot a little farther away from Exel. This put me near Mizzy, who was packing away her bomb. "Don't mind him," she said to me as Val and Exel continued to chat. "He was a mortician, back before."

I nodded, but didn't prod. In the Reckoners, the less we knew about one another's family members and the like, the less we could betray if an Epic decided to torture us.

"Thanks for standing up for me," Mizzy said softly. "In front of Tia."

"She's intense sometimes," I said. "Both her and Prof. But they're good people. She can complain all she likes, but in your place I doubt that either of them would have let those people die. You did the right thing."

"Even if it put you in danger?"

"I got out of it, didn't I?"

Mizzy glanced at my throat. I felt at it, reminded of the soreness. It hurt when I breathed.

"Yeaaah," she said. "You're just being nice, but I appreciate that. I didn't expect you to be nice."

"Me?" I said.

"Sure!" She seemed to be recovering some of her natural perkiness. "Steelslayer, the guy who talked Phaedrus into hitting Steelheart. I expected you to be all intimidating and brooding and *'They killed my father'* and intense and everything."

"How much do you know about me?" I asked, surprised.

"More than I probably should. We're supposed to be secretive and all that, but I can't help asking questions, you know? And … well … I might have listened in when Sam told Val about

what you guys were planning in Newcago.…"

She gave me a kind of apologetic grimace and shrugged.

"Well, trust me," I said. "I'm more intense than I look. I'm intense like a lion is orange."

"So, like … medium intense? Since a lion is kind of a tannish color?"

"No, they're orange." I frowned. "Aren't they? I've never actually seen one."

"I think tigers are the orange ones," Mizzy said. "But they're still only half orange, since they have black stripes. Maybe you should be intense like an *orange* is orange."

"Too obvious," I said. "I'm intense like a lion is tannish." Did that work? Didn't exactly slip off the tongue.

Mizzy cocked her head, looking at me. "You're kinda weird."

"No, look, it's just because the metaphor didn't work. I've got it. I'm intense like—"

"No, it's okay," Mizzy said, smiling. "I like it."

"Yeah," Exel said, laughing. "I'll remember that orange thing for your eulogy."

Great. A few hours into the new team, and I'd convinced them that Steelslayer was adorably strange. I settled back into my seat with a sigh.

We traveled for a while, an hour or more. Long enough that I wasn't certain we were still in Babilar. Eventually the sub slowed. A moment later the entire thing lurched, and some kind of clamps locked on from the outside.

Wherever we were going, we had arrived. Exel got to his feet and dug out some towels. He nodded to Val, who climbed up the ladder.

"Kill the lights," she said.

We obligingly put out the lights, and I heard Val undo the hatch up above. Water streamed down, but from the sound of it, Exel quickly mopped it up.

"Out we go," Mizzy whispered to me. I felt my way to the ladder, letting the others each go up before me. I heard them chatting above, so I knew that when Tia came to the ladder, she was last.

"Prof?" I asked her softly.

"The others don't know exactly what happened," she whispered. "I told them that Prof led Obliteration off, but that he

was all right and would catch up to us."

"And what really happened?"

She didn't reply in the darkness.

"Tia," I said, "I'm the only other one here who knows about him. You might as well use me as a resource. I can help."

"He doesn't need either of our help right now," she said. "He just needs time."

"What did he do?"

She sighed softly. "He deliberately let himself get hit with a burst of fire, something no ordinary person could have survived. While Obliteration was standing over him gloating, Jon healed himself, leaped up, and snatched off the man's glasses. The tip about Obliteration being nearsighted? Turns out it was a good one."

"Nice," I said.

"Jon said that scared the wits out of the creature," Tia whispered. "Obliteration ported away and didn't return. Jon's safe; everything is okay. So you can stop worrying."

I let her pass. Everything wasn't okay. If Prof was staying away, it was because he was afraid of how he'd act around us. I reluctantly shouldered my pack and gun, then climbed up into a pitch-black room.

"You out, David?" Val's voice sounded in the darkness.

"Yeah," I said.

"Over here."

I followed the sound of her voice. She took me by the arm and steered me through a doorway with some black cloth on it. She followed, then closed a door behind us before opening one in front, letting in light so I could finally see the bolt-hole the Reckoners were using as a base here in Babilar.

Turns out it wasn't a hole at all.

It was a mansion.

16

LUSH red carpets. Dark hardwood. Lounge chairs. A bar with crystal that reflected the light of Val's mobile. Open space. A lot of open space.

My jaw hit the floor. Well, the door, technically. I smacked it as I stepped into the room and turned, trying to stare in all directions at once. The place looked like a king's palace. No … no, it looked like an *Epic's* palace.

"How …" I stepped into the center of the room. "Are we still underwater?"

"Mostly," Val said. "We're in some rich dude's underground bunker on Long Island. Howard Righton. Built the thing with its own airtight filtration system in case of nuclear fallout." She slung her pack onto the bar. "Unfortunately for him, he anticipated the wrong kind of apocalypse. An Epic knocked his plane out of the sky as he and his family were flying home from Europe."

I looked back toward the short hallway leading to the submarine room. Exel closed its door, locking the hallway in darkness. I had a vague impression that we'd risen up through the floor of the room, which probably had some kind of docking mechanism. But how had the submarine docked *under* a bunker in the ground?

"Storage basement," Exel explained as he waddled past. "Righton's bunker had a big chamber for food storage cut out underneath it. That's flooded now, and we broke open one side, forming a kind of cave we can drive the sub into. Prof cut into it through the floor and installed the docking seal a few years back."

“Jon likes to have safe places in every city he might visit,” Tia said, settling on one of the plush couches with her mobile. It would work down here—they worked in the steel catacombs of Newcago, so I was pretty sure they’d work anywhere.

Honestly, I was feeling a little naked without mine. I’d saved for years working in the Factory to buy it. Now that my rifle was gone and the mobile destroyed, I found I didn’t really have much from that time of my life.

“So now what?” I asked.

“Now we wait for Jon to finish his reconnaissance,” Tia said, “and then we send for someone to pick him up. Missouri, why don’t you show David to his quarters.” *Which should keep him out of my hair for now*, her tone implied.

I shouldered my pack as Mizzy nodded and bobbed off down a corridor with a flashlight. It suddenly hit me just how tired I was. Even though we’d spent the trip here driving at night, I hadn’t completely switched my days and nights. For the last few months it had been a novel thing for me to live in the light, and I’d enjoyed it.

Well, it seemed darkness would become the norm again. I followed Mizzy out of the main sitting room down a corridor lined with artistic photos of colored water being flung into the air. I figured it was supposed to look modern and chic. All it did was remind me that we were on the bottom of the ocean.

“I can’t believe how nice this is,” I said, peering into a library lined with books, more than I’d ever seen in my life. Small, emergency-style lights glowed on the walls in most of the rooms, so it appeared we had power.

“Yeaaah,” Mizzy said. “People out on Long Island had it nice, didn’t they? Beaches, big houses. We’d visit when I was a little girl, and I’d play in the sand and think about what it must be like to live in one of those mansions.” She trailed her fingers along the wall as she walked. “I took the sub past my old apartment once. That was a hoot.”

“Was it tough to see now?”

“Nah. I barely remember the days before Calamity. For most of my life I lived in the Painted Village.”

“The what?”

“Neighborhood downtown,” she said. “Good place. Not too many gangs. Usually had food.”

I followed Mizzy farther down the corridor, and she pointed toward a door in the hallway. “Bathroom. Go in the first door and *always* close it. Then go through the other door. There is no light; you’ll have to move by touch. There are facilities and a sink. That’s the only running water in the place. Never bring anything out; not even a cup to drink from.”

“Regalia?”

Mizzy nodded. “We’re outside her range, but even if she almost never moves, we figure it’s best to be safe. If she finds this place, after all, we’re dead.”

I wasn’t certain. As Tia had pointed out, Regalia could have killed us up above, but she hadn’t. She seemed to be holding back the darkness, like Prof. “The gangs,” I said, joining Mizzy as we kept walking. “Regalia got rid of those?”

“Yeah,” Mizzy said. “The only gang left is Newton’s, and even she’s been pretty relaxed lately, for an Epic.”

“So Regalia is good for the city.”

“Well, other than flooding it,” Mizzy said, “killing tens of thousands in the process. But I suppose by comparison to how terrible she used to be, she’s not as bad now. Kind of like the dog chewing on your ankle is pleasant compared to the one that used to be chewing on your head.”

“Nice metaphor,” I noted.

“Though shockingly bereft of lions,” Mizzy said, stepping into another larger room. How big *was* this place? The room we entered was circular and had a piano on one side—I’d never seen one of those except in movies—and some fancy dining tables on the other side. The ceiling was painted black, and …

No. That wasn’t black. That was water.

I gasped, cringing down as I realized that the ceiling was pure glass, and looked up through the dark waters. Some fish swam by in a little school, and I *swore* I could see something large cruising past. A shadow.

“This guy built a bomb shelter,” I said, “with a *skylight*?”

“Six-inch acrylic,” Mizzy answered, shading her flashlight, “with a retractable steel plate. And before you ask, no, Regalia can’t see through it. First off, as I’ve pointed out, we’re far enough from the city that we should be outside her range. Secondly, she needs a water surface open to the air.” She hesitated. “That said, I wish we could get the thing closed.

Blasted plate is jammed open up there."

We passed quickly through that awful room and entered another nice, windowless corridor. A little ways down it, Mizzy pushed open a door and gestured inside toward a large bedroom.

"Do I share with Exel?" I asked, peeking in.

"Share?" Mizzy asked. "This place has *twelve* bedrooms. You can have two, if you want."

I hesitated, regarding the dark wood shelves, the furry red carpet, the bed as large as a really, really big piece of toast. In Newcago having a tiny, single-room flat all to myself had cost most of my life savings. This bedroom was easily four times that size.

I walked in and set my pack down. It looked tiny in the spacious room.

"Flashlight on the counter there," Mizzy said, shining her mobile toward it. "We just got a new shipment of energy cells from your friend in Newcago."

I walked over and prodded at the bed. "People sleep on things this fluffy?"

"Well, there's also the *floor*, if you're so inclined. The light switches don't work, but some of the outlets do—try them to plug in your mobile, and you should be able to find one with juice."

I held up the shattered mobile.

"Oh," she said. "Right. I'll fix up something new for you tomorrow."

I poked at the blankets again. My eyelids drooped like angry drunk men stumbling down a street, looking for an alleyway in which to vomit. I needed sleep. But there were so many things I didn't know.

"Prof had you guys observing here," I said to Mizzy, sitting down on the bed. "For quite a while, right?"

"Yup," Mizzy said, leaning against the doorway.

"Did he say why?"

"I always figured he wanted every bit of information he could get on Regalia," Mizzy said. "For when we decided to hit her."

"Doubtful. Before Steelheart, Prof never hit Epics this important. Besides, Reckoners almost never do long-term observation. They're usually in and out of a city in under two months, leaving a few bodies behind."

"And you know that much about how the other Reckoner cells

operate?" She said it laughing, as if that were silly.

"Yeah," I said, truthful. "Pretty much."

"Is that so?"

"I … kind of get a little obsessive about things." But *not* in a nerdy way. No matter what Megan says. "I'll tell you about it another time. I think I'm going to turn in."

"Sleep well, then," Mizzy said. She turned and trailed away, her light going with her.

Prof knew, I thought, climbing into the bed. *He didn't hit Regalia because he knew she was trying to be better. He has to wonder … if there's a way to make all of this work. To get around the powers ruining the people who use them.*

I yawned, figuring I should probably change out of my clothing.…

But sleep took me first.

PART THREE

17

I awoke to darkness.

Groaning, I stirred in the overstuffed bed. It was like swimming through whipped cream. I finally managed to reach the side of the bed and sit up, running a hand through my hair. By reflex I reached for my mobile, feeling around on the bedside stand until I remembered it was broken and I'd given it to Mizzy.

I felt lost for a moment. What time was it? How long had I slept? Living in the understreets, I'd often had to rely on my mobile to tell time. Daylight had been a thing of memories, like grass-filled parks and my mother's voice.

I stumbled out of the bed, kicking aside my jacket—which I'd taken off during the night sometime—and felt my way to the door. The hall outside was lit from one direction, and soft voices echoed distantly. Yawning, I made my way toward the light, eventually approaching the atrium—the place with the piano and the glass ceiling. It glowed with a soft blue illumination coming from above.

Filtered sunlight showed that we were about fifty feet deep. The water was murkier than I'd anticipated—not a crystalline blue, but a darker, more opaque color. Anything could be hiding in that.

I could hear the voices better now. Prof and Tia. I crossed the atrium, pointedly not looking up anymore, and found the two of them in the library.

"She sounded like she was genuinely conflicted, Jon," Tia said as I approached. "She obviously wanted you in Babilar, so you're right on that point. But she could have killed us, yet she didn't. I think she does want you to stop her."

I didn't want to eavesdrop so I peeked into the room. Prof stood by the wall of books, one arm resting on a shelf, and Tia sat at a desk, a notebook computer open beside her and surrounded by books. She held a kind of pouch drink with a straw coming out of it—a way to drink without risking a surface that Regalia could peer through, I realized. Knowing Tia, the pouch was filled with cola.

Prof nodded toward me, so I wandered in. "I think Tia's right," I said. "Regalia is fighting the use of her powers and resisting their corruption."

"Abigail is wily," Prof said. "If you assume you know her motives, you're probably wrong." He tapped his finger on the shelf. "Call Exel back in from his reconnaissance, Tia, and set up the meeting room. It's time for us to discuss a plan."

She nodded, then closed her notebook and slipped out of the room.

"A plan," I said, stepping up to Prof. "You mean for killing Regalia."

He nodded.

"After all this time watching, you're just going to up and murder her?"

"How many people died yesterday when Obliteration attacked, David? Did you hear the count?"

I shook my head.

"Eighty," Prof said. "Eighty people burned to death in a matter of minutes. Because Regalia unleashed that *monster* on the city."

"But she's resisting," I said. "She's fighting off whatever darkness it is that—"

"She's not," Prof snapped, walking past me. "You're mistaken. Go get ready for the meeting."

"But—"

"David," Prof said from the doorway, "ten months ago you came to us with a plea and an argument. You convinced me that Steelheart needed to be brought down. I listened to you, and now I want you to listen to me. Regalia has gone too far. It's time to stop her."

"You were friends, weren't you?" I said.

He turned away from me.

"Don't you think," I said, "it's at least worth *considering* whether we can save her or not?"

“This is about Megan, isn’t it?”

“What? No—”

“Don’t lie to me, son,” Prof interrupted. “In regard to Epics, you’re as bloodthirsty as men come. I’ve seen it in you; it’s something we share.”

He walked back into the room, stepping up to me. Man, Prof could *loom* when he wanted to. Like a gravestone about to topple on a sprouting flower. He stood like that for a moment, then sighed and reached up, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“You’re right, David,” Prof said softly. “We were friends. But do you really think I should stay my hand just because I happen to like Abigail? You think our previous familiarity condones her murders?”

“I … No. But if she’s under the sway of her powers, this might not be her fault.”

“It doesn’t work that way, son. Abigail made her choice. She could have stayed clean. She didn’t.” He met my eyes, and I saw real emotion in there. Not anger. His expression was too soft, his grimace too pained. That was sorrow.

He let go of my shoulder and turned to leave. “Perhaps she really is resisting her powers, as you say. If that’s the case, then I suspect that deep down the reason she lured me here is because she’s *looking* for someone who can kill her. Someone who can save her from herself. She sent for me so that I could stop her from killing people, and that’s what I’m going to do. She won’t be the first friend I’ve had to put down.”

Before I could say anything to that, he walked out of the room and I could hear him moving down the hallway. I leaned back against the wall, feeling drained. Conversations with Prof always had a distinct intensity to them.

Eventually I went looking for a way to take a shower. It turned out I had to do it in the darkness, and with cold water. Both were fine. Back in my Factory days, I’d been allowed just one shower every three days. I appreciated anything more than that.

A half hour later, I stepped into the meeting room, a chamber a few doors down from my bedroom. One entire wall was glass and looked out into the water of the sound. Delightful. And everyone sat facing it too. It wasn’t that I was frightened; I just didn’t like being reminded that we were submerged under all that water. One little leak and we’d all end up drowning in here.

Exel sat in a comfortable-looking easy chair with his feet up. Mizzy was fiddling with her phone, and Val stood by the doorway, arms crossed. The Hispanic woman looked like she had no intention to sit down and relax. She took life seriously—something I appreciated. We shared a nod as I walked in and settled myself in a chair next to Mizzy.

"How's the city up there?" I asked Exel.

"Lots of funerals," he said. "Attended a really nice one over near the central expanse. Flowers on the water, a beautiful eulogy. Terrible embalming, though I suppose you can't blame them, considering the lack of resources."

"You did reconnaissance at a *funeral*?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "People like to chat at funerals. It's an emotional time. I caught some of Newton's flunkies watching from a distance."

Mizzy looked up from her mobile. "What did they do?"

"They just watched," Exel said, shaking his head. "Can't figure that group out, honestly. We may need to infiltrate them at some point…."

"I doubt her gangs are recruiting fat dudes in their forties, Exel," Val said from the doorway.

"I'd just pretend to be a chef," Exel said. "Every organization needs both good chefs and good morticians. The two great constants of life. Food and death."

Tia and Prof entered a short time later, Prof carrying an easel under one arm. Tia took a seat in the room's remaining chair while Prof set up the easel and paper just in front of the aquariumlike window. How wonderful. I was going to have to stare at that water the entire time.

"Imager isn't set up yet," Prof said. "So we'll do this the old-fashioned way. Mizzy, you're low man on the team roster. You get scribe duties."

She hopped up from her chair and actually seemed excited by the prospect. She took a marker and wrote *Reckoner Super Plan for Killing Regalia* at the top of the sheet. Each *i* was dotted with a heart.

Prof watched this with a flat expression, then soldiered onward. "In killing Steelheart, the Reckoners made a promise, one we need to keep. Powerful Epics aren't beyond our reach. Regalia has proven her disrespect for human life, and we are the

only law capable of bringing her to justice. It's time to eradicate her."

"I'm worried about this," Exel said, shaking his head. "Regalia has been running a solid PR campaign lately. People in the city don't love her, but they don't hate her either. Are you certain this is what we should be doing, Prof?"

"She spent the last five months sending assassins to try to kill my team in Newcago," Prof said, voice cold. "Sam is dead by her order as well. It's personal, Exel. Good PR or not, she's murdering people right and left in this city. We bring her down. It's not negotiable."

He looked at me when he said it.

Mizzy wrote *Really important, and we totally need to do it* on the paper, with three big arrows pointing at the heading above. Then, after a moment, she added *Boy, it's on now* in smaller letters beside that one.

"All right," Val said from beside the doorway. "So we'll need to find her weakness, which is something we've never been able to do. I doubt soap is going to be enough."

Prof looked to Tia.

"Abigail isn't a High Epic," Tia said.

"What?" Exel said. "Of course she is. I've never met an Epic as powerful as Regalia. She raised the water level of the *entire city* to flood it. She moved millions of tons of water, and holds it all here!"

"I didn't say she wasn't powerful," Tia said. "Only that she isn't a High Epic—which is defined as an Epic whose powers prevent them from being killed in conventional ways."

Mizzy wrote *Regalia totally needs to get with the business* on her sheet.

"What about Regalia's prognosticative abilities?" I asked Tia.

"Overblown," Tia said. "She's barely class F, despite what she'd have people believe. She can rarely interpret what she sees, and it certainly can't elevate her to High Epic status by virtue of its protective nature."

"I've theorized about that in my notes," I said, nodding. "You're sure it's true?"

"Very."

Exel raised his hand. "Um, I'm lost. Anyone else lost? Cuz I'm lost."

Mizzy wrote *Exel needs to pay better attention to his job* on the board.

"Regalia," I explained to him, "has no form of protective powers, not directly. *That's* what makes someone a High Epic. Steelheart's skin was impenetrable; the Clapper warped air around him so anything stabbing or hitting him was teleported to his other side; Firefight reincarnates when killed. Regalia has none of that."

"Abigail is powerful," Prof agreed, "but actually quite fragile. If we can find her, we can kill her."

It was true, and I realized I'd been thinking about Regalia like I had Steelheart. That was wrong. Killing him had been all about his weakness. The "weakness" that would stop Regalia's powers wasn't nearly as important as finding out where she was hiding her physical form.

"This, then," Tia said, taking a sip of her cola, "should probably be the core of our plan. We need to locate Regalia. I've told you that the functional range on her abilities is just under five miles. We should be able to use that knowledge to pinpoint where she's hiding."

Mizzy obligingly wrote on the board, *Step One: find Regalia, then totally explode her. Lots and lots*.

"I've always wondered," Val said, regarding Tia, "how do you know so much about her powers? From the lorists?"

"Yes," Tia answered, completely straight-faced. Sparks. Tia was a *good* liar.

"You're sure," I said, "that there isn't more?"

Prof glared at me and I stared right back at him. I wasn't going to outright say things he'd told me in confidence, but this hiding things from the team made me uncomfortable. The rest of the team should at least know that Prof and Regalia had a history together.

"Well," Tia said, reluctantly. "You should all probably know that Jon and I knew Regalia during the years just after she became an Epic. This was before the Reckoners."

"What?" Val said, stalking forward. "You didn't tell me?"

"It wasn't relevant," Tia replied.

"Not relevant?" Val demanded. "Sam is *dead*, Tia!"

"We've passed on to you things we've thought you could use against her."

“But—” Val began.

“Stand down, Valentine,” Prof said. “We have kept secrets from you. We will continue to do so if we think it’s for the best.”

Val fumed but crossed her arms, now standing beside my chair. She didn’t say anything, though Mizzy wrote on the board, *Step Two: put Val on decaf*. I wasn’t certain what that meant.

Val took a deep breath, but she finally sat down.

Mizzy kept writing. *Step Three: Mizzy gets a cookie*.

“Can I have a cookie too?” Exel asked.

“No,” Prof snapped. “This meeting is going nowhere. Mizzy, write down …” He trailed off, looking at her sheet for the first time since we’d started, and realizing she’d already filled the entire thing up with her comments.

Mizzy blushed.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Prof said to her. “We probably don’t need that anyway.”

Mizzy scurried to a seat, head down.

“Our plan,” Prof said, “needs to be about locating Regalia’s base of operations, then sneaking in to kill her, preferably when she’s asleep and can’t fight back.”

My stomach lurched at that. Shooting someone in the head while they’re sleeping? Didn’t seem very heroic. But I didn’t say anything, and neither did anyone else. At our core we were assassins, and that was that. Was killing them in their sleep really any different from luring them into a trap and killing them there?

“Suggestions?” Prof said.

“You sure that finding her base will work?” I asked. “Steelheart moved around a lot, sleeping in different places each night. I know a lot of Epics who maintain many different residences precisely to stop something like this from happening.”

“Regalia isn’t Steelheart,” Prof said. “She isn’t anywhere near as paranoid as he was—and she *likes* her comforts. She’ll have picked one place and bunkered down in it, and I doubt she moves from it often.”

“She’s getting old,” Tia agreed. “When we knew her before, she could spend days at a time in the same chair, receiving visitors. I agree with Jon’s interpretation. Abigail would rather have one base, protected very well, than a dozen lesser hideouts. She’ll definitely have a backup, but won’t use it unless she knows her primary base is compromised.”

“I’ve considered this before,” Exel said, thoughtful. “A five-mile radius means she could be almost anywhere in Babilar and still have influence here. Her base could be over in old New Jersey, even.”

“Yes,” Tia said, “but each time she appears, she narrows that down for us. Since she can only make projections five miles away from wherever her base is, each time she does appear, we learn more about where she might be.”

I nodded slowly. “Like a catapult that shoots enormous grapes.”

Everyone looked at me.

“No, listen,” I said. “If you had a grape catapult, and it was good at lobbing grapes, but sometimes lobbed them different distances, you could leave it firing over a long period of time. And maybe put it on some sort of spinner. Then, when you came back, even if someone had stolen the catapult you’d be able to tell where it was located—by the pattern of grapes it launched. It’s the same here. Only Regalia’s projections are the grapes, and her base is the catapult!”

“That … almost makes sense,” Exel said.

“Can I be the one firing the catapult?” Mizzy asked. “Sounds like fun.”

“Colorful description notwithstanding,” Tia said, “this will work if we can get enough data points. And we won’t need nearly as many of … uh … the grapes David mentions. Here’s what we do: We pick predetermined locations and set up situations we’re sure will provoke Regalia to appear via one of her projections. If she does appear in that location, we get a data point. If she doesn’t, that might be outside her range. Do this enough times, and I’m sure I’ll be able to pinpoint her location.”

I nodded, understanding. “We need to go make some noise in the city, and see if we can make Regalia come out and interact with us.”

“Exactly,” Tia said.

“What about the range on her other powers?” I asked. “If she’s raised the water around the city, can’t we use the limit of those abilities to pinpoint her?”

Tia looked toward Prof.

“Her water manipulation powers come in two flavors,” he said. “The little tendrils, like you’ve seen, and the large-scale ‘shoving’ of massive amounts of liquid. The small tendrils can only go out

as far as she can see, so yes, spotting her using those will work for our plan. Her large-scale powers don't tell us much—they're more like the movement of tides. She can raise up water in a vast area, and can do it on a massive scale. This ability takes less precision—and she can do it from a lot farther away. So there's no telling from the shape of water in Babilar where exactly she might be hiding."

"That said," Tia added, "we're fairly certain Abigail doesn't know we discovered the range limit on her small-scale powers, so we have an edge. We *can* use them to find her. The trick is going to be coming up with ways to draw her attention—events so compelling that she'll either come confront us, or we'll be reasonably certain from her absence that she wasn't able to."

"Surefire ways to draw her attention?" I said.

"Yes," Tia replied. "Preferably done in a way that doesn't make it obvious we're trying to get her attention."

"Well, that's easy," I said. "We hit Epics."

The others looked toward me.

"Look, we're going to have to kill Obliteration eventually anyway," I said. "Regalia's using him as some kind of gun to our heads, a threat to the entire city. If we remove him, we remove one of her primary tools—and so a hit on him is really likely to draw her out to try to stop us. If we succeed, we've hindered Regalia, stopped the killing, *and* gained a point of data that we can use to further pinpoint her base. Plus, we avoid looking suspicious, since we're doing what the Reckoners always do."

"He has a point, Jon," Tia said.

"Perhaps," Prof said. "But we don't know where Obliteration will strike—we'll have to be reactive, which makes it difficult to lay a trap for him. It also makes it harder to pick a location that would give us information about Regalia, if she appears."

"We could try Newton instead," Exel offered. "She and her flunkies tend to do patrols around the city, and those are reasonably predictable. Newton's kind of become Regalia's right-hand woman. If she's put in danger, Regalia will show up for certain."

"Except," Val said, "Newton really isn't a threat these days. Her gangs are in check—they might bully a little, but they haven't been killing people. I agree with Steelslayer; Obliteration is a *serious* issue. I don't want to see Babilar go the way of Houston."

Prof considered for a moment, turning to look out through the shimmering blue water. “Val, does your team have operational plans for bringing down Newton?”

“Yes, but …”

“But?”

“That plan depended on having Sam and the spyril.”

“The spyril?” I asked.

“Broken now,” Val said. “Useless.”

From her tone, I sensed it was a touchy subject.

“Work with Tia and David,” Prof said to her. “Revise your plans and present me with several scenarios for bringing down Newton, then devise another set for bringing down Obliteration. We’ll move forward with David’s plan, and use hits on those two to draw Regalia out. Also give me a list of places where your team has *confirmed* seeing Regalia’s projections.”

“Sure,” Val said. “But there aren’t many of that last one. We’ve only seen her once or twice, other than what she did last night.”

“Even two points will give us a baseline to work from in locating her,” Tia said. “Exel, do some reconnaissance in the city and gather every rumor about Regalia appearing or using her powers in an obvious way. Some might not be reliable, but we might be able to use it to build a map to work from.”

“I was going to see some people in two days who might know something about this,” Exel said. “We can start there.”

“Very well,” Prof said. “Get on it. Team dismissed. All but *you*.” He pointed right at me.

Tia remained in her seat as the others left, and I found myself sweating. I shoved that down and forced myself to stand up and walk to Prof, who sat beside the big window filled with endless blue water.

“You need to take care, son,” Prof said quietly. “You know things others don’t. That is a trust I’ve given you.”

“I—”

“And don’t think I didn’t notice you trying to deflect the conversation today away from killing Regalia and toward killing Obliteration.”

“Do you deny it’s better to hit him first?”

“No. I didn’t contradict you because you’re right. It makes sense to hit Obliteration—and perhaps Newton—first to remove some of Regalia’s resources and help box her in. But I remind you

not to forget that she is our primary target."

"Yes sir," I said.

"Dismissed."

I walked from the room, annoyed that I was singled out so specifically for that treatment. I made my way down the hall, and for some reason I couldn't help thinking of Sourcefield. Not the powerful Epic, but the regular person deprived of her powers, looking at me with dawning horror and utter confusion.

I'd never had a problem killing Epics. I still wouldn't have a problem doing it, when the time came. That didn't prevent me from imagining Megan's face instead of Sourcefield's as I pulled the trigger.

Once, I'd absolutely hated Epics. I realized I couldn't feel that way any longer. Not now that I'd known Prof, Megan, and Edmund. Perhaps that was why I rebelled against killing Regalia. It seemed to me she was trying to fight her Epic nature. And maybe that meant we could save her.

All of these questions led me toward dangerous speculation. What would happen if we captured an Epic here, like we'd done with Edmund back in Newcago? What if we tied up someone like Newton or Obliteration, then used their weakness to perpetually negate their powers? How long without using their abilities would it take for them to start acting like a regular person?

If Newton or Obliteration weren't under the influence of their powers, would they help us like Edmund had? And would that not, in turn, prove that we could do the same for Regalia herself? And after her, Megan?

As I reached my room, I found myself mulling over the idea, liking it more and more.

18

EVENING was just arriving as Mizzy, Exel, and I climbed from the sub into the dark, water-filled building. We moved by touch to the Reckoners' little boat. Once settled, Mizzy clicked a button on her mobile, and the sub silently slipped back into the depths.

I wasn't certain how effective this was at hiding from Regalia. Hopefully our precautions would at least keep her from finding the exact location of our base, even if she figured out about the sub itself. We took oars, turned on the lights of our mobiles, and set out down a flooded street.

It was evening—two days since the meeting where we'd settled on a plan for killing Regalia—and by the time we reached populated rooftops the sun had begun to set. We climbed out of the boat, and Exel tossed a water bottle to an old man who was watching over several boats tied here. Pure water was somewhat difficult to come by in the city; it needed to be fetched from streams across in Jersey. A bottle of it wasn't worth much, but enough to act as a basic kind of currency for small services.

The others set out across the rooftop, but I lingered, watching the sun set. I'd spent most of my life trapped in the gloom of Steelheart's reign. Why did the people of Babilar only come out at night? These people could know the light intimately, but they instead *opted* for the darkness. Didn't they know how lucky they were?

The sun sank down like a giant golden pat of butter melting onto the corn of New Jersey. Or … wait. That abandoned city was kind of more like spinach than corn. So the sun sank down into the spinach of Jersey.

And Babilar came alive.

Graffiti lit with vibrant, electric colors. A mosaic, unnoticed in the sunlight, burst outward at my feet: a depiction of the moon with someone's name signed in big, fat white letters at the bottom. I had to admit there was something organically magnificent about it. There hadn't been graffiti in Newcago, where it had been a sign of rebellion—and rebellion had been punishable by death. Of course in Newcago, picking your nose could have been construed as a sign of rebellion too.

I hurried off after Mizzy and Exel, feeling naked without my rifle—though I carried Megan's handgun in my pocket and wore my Reckoner shield, which really just meant Prof had gifted me with some of his forcefield energy. I wasn't sure why Mizzy and Exel had asked for me to join this reconnaissance mission. I didn't mind—anything to get out into the open air—but wouldn't Val have been better suited to meeting with informants and interpreting their intel?

We walked for a short while, crossing bridges and passing groups of people who carried baskets of glowing fruit. They nodded affably to us, which was creepy. Weren't people supposed to walk with their eyes down, worried that anyone they passed might be an Epic?

I knew there was something profoundly wrong with those thoughts inside my head. I'd spent months in Newcago after Steelheart's fall trying to help build a city where people *wouldn't* be afraid all the time. Now I worried when these people acted open and friendly?

I couldn't help how I felt, though, and my instinct was that something was wrong with people around here. We crossed a low rooftop, passing Babilarans who lounged with their feet in the water. Others idled, lying on their backs, eating glowing fruit as if they didn't have a care in the world. Hadn't these people heard what Obliteration had done uptown just the other day?

I glanced down as we crossed onto another rope bridge, unnerved as a group of youths swam beneath us, laughing. The people of this city didn't need to display the beaten-down attitudes that had been common in Newcago, but a healthy dose of paranoia never hurt anyone. Right?

Mizzy noticed me looking at the splashing swimmers. "What?" she asked.

"They seem so …"

“Carefree?” she asked.

“Idiotic.”

Mizzy grinned. “Babilar does tend to inspire a relaxed attitude.”

“It’s the way of life,” Exel agreed from just ahead, where he led us toward the informants. “More specifically, it’s the religion—if you want to call it that—of Dawnslight.”

“Dawnslight,” I said. “That’s an Epic, right?”

“Maybe,” Exel said with a shrug. “Everyone attributes the food and the light to ‘Dawnslight.’ There’s considerable disagreement over who, or what, that is.”

“An Epic, obviously,” I said, glancing toward a nearby building lit with glowing fruit inside the broken windows. I had nothing in my notes about such an Epic, however. It was disconcerting to know that I’d somehow missed such a powerful one.

“Well, either way,” Exel continued, “a lot of people here have learned to just let go. What good does it do to stress all the time about the Epics? You can’t do anything about them. A lot of people figure it’s just better to enjoy their lives and accept that the Epics might kill them tomorrow.”

“That’s stupid,” I said.

Exel looked back, raising an eyebrow.

“If you accept the Epics,” I said, “they’ve won. That’s what went wrong; that’s why nobody fights back.”

“Sure, I guess. But there’s no harm in relaxing a little, you know?”

“There’s *all kinds* of harm in it. Relaxed people don’t get anything done.”

Exel shrugged. Sparks! He almost talked like he believed all that nonsense. I let the matter drop, though my unease didn’t lessen. It wasn’t just the people we passed, with their friendly smiles. It was about being so exposed, so in the open. With all these rooftops and broken windows around, a sniper could take me down with ease. I’d be glad when we reached the informants. Those types liked closed doors and hidden rooms.

“So,” I said to Mizzy as we turned at another roof and stepped onto another bridge. Children sat along one side, kicking in unison and giggling as they made the bridge swing slowly side to side. “Val mentioned something at our meeting the other day. The … spyril?”

“It was Sam’s,” Mizzy said softly. “Special equipment we bought from the Knighthawk Foundry.”

“It was a weapon, then?”

“Well, kind of,” Mizzy said. “It was Epic-derived, built to mimic their powers. The spyril manipulated water; Sam would shoot it out beneath him, boosting him into the air, letting him move around the city easily.”

“A water jet pack …?”

“Yeah, kind of like that.”

“A water *jet pack*. And nobody’s using it right now?” I was stunned. “So … you know … I could maybe …”

“It’s broken,” Mizzy said before I could finish. “When we recovered Sam—” She had to stop for a moment. “Anyway, when we got him back, the spyril was missing its motivator.”

“Which is …?”

She looked at me as we walked on the bridge; she seemed dumbfounded. “The motivator? You know? It makes technology based on Epic powers work.”

I shrugged. Technology based off Epics was new to me since I’d joined the Reckoners. Despite things like my shield and the harmsway—which were fake—we *did* have technology that didn’t come from Prof’s powers. Supposedly these had originally been crafted using genetic material taken from the corpses of Epics. When we killed them we would often harvest cells and use it as high-level currency for trading with arms dealers.

“So stick another motivator thingy in,” I said.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Mizzy said, laughing. “You really don’t know any of this?”

“Mizzy,” Exel said from the bridge ahead of us, “David is a point man. He spends his time shooting Epics, not fixing things in the shop. Which is why we have people like you.”

“Riiiight,” Mizzy said, rolling her eyes at him. “Thank you. Great lecture. Thumbs-up. David, motivators come from research into Epics, and each one is coded to the individual device.” She sounded excited as she talked—this was obviously something she’d read a lot about. “We’ve asked Knighthawk for a replacement, but it could take quite a bit of time.”

“Fine,” I said. “As long as when we do fix the thing, *I* get to try it first.”

Exel laughed. “Are you sure you want to do that, David? Using

the spyril would involve lots of swimming."

"I can swim."

He looked back at me and raised an eyebrow. "Care to discuss the way you regarded the water on our trip into the city? You looked like you thought it would bite you."

"I think guns are dangerous too," I said, "but I'm carrying one right now."

"If you say so," he said, turning back around and leading the way onward.

I followed, sullen. How had he figured out about me and water? Was it that obvious to everyone? *I* hadn't even known about it until I'd gotten to this flooded city.

I remembered that sinking feeling … the water closing around me … the darkness and the sheer panic of water flooding inside my nose and mouth. And …

I shivered. Besides, didn't sharks live in water like this? Why weren't those swimmers afraid?

They're crazy people, I reminded myself. *They aren't afraid of Epics either*. Well, I wasn't about to get eaten by a shark, but I did need to learn to swim. I'd have to do something about the sharks. Spikes on my feet, maybe?

We eventually stopped at the lower end of a bridge that stretched high into the sky toward a glowing rooftop above. "We're here," Exel noted, then started the steep climb.

I followed, curious. Were we going to find the informants hiding inside the jungles of that building, perhaps? As we climbed upward, I picked out an odd sound coming from above. Was that music?

Indeed it was. It enveloped me as we drew closer—the sound of drums and fiddles. Neon forms moved this way and that wearing spraypainted clothing, and beneath the music came the sounds of people talking.

I stopped on the bridge, causing Mizzy to pause just ahead of me.

"What is that?" I asked.

"A party," she said.

"And our informants are there?"

"Informants? What are you talking about?"

"The people Exel is coming to meet. To purchase information."

"Purchase … David—Exel, you, and I are going to mingle and

chat with people at the party to see what we can find out."

Oh.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure, of course I am." I continued forward, pushing past her up the bridge toward the roof.

A party. What was *I* going to do at a party?

I had a feeling I'd have been much better off in the water with the sharks.

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I stood at the edge of the expansive rooftop, concentrating on breathing in and out, wrestling with a mild panic as Mizzy and Exel entered the party.

People wearing glowing, painted clothing moved about in a frenetic mix; some danced while others feasted on the variety of fruits that had been heaped upon tables along the perimeter. Music crashed across us all—overwhelming sounds of drums and fiddles.

It felt like a riot. A rhythmic, and well-catered, riot. And most of the people here were my age.

I'd known other teenagers, of course. There had been many at the Factory in Newcago where I'd worked and lived since I was nine. But the Factory hadn't thrown parties, unless you counted the movie nights where we'd watched old films, and I hadn't interacted much with the others. My free time had been dedicated to my notes on Epics and my plans to bring down Steelheart. I hadn't been a nerd, mind you. I'd just been the type of guy who spent a lot of time by himself, focused entirely on a single consuming interest.

"Come on!" Mizzy said, appearing from the party like a seed spat from the mouth of a glowing jack-o'-lantern. She grabbed my hand and towed me into the chaos.

The tempest of light and sound enveloped me. Weren't parties about talking to people? I could barely hear myself in the middle of this thing, with all of the noise and the music. I followed Mizzy as she brought me to one of the food tables, which was surrounded by a small group of Babilarans in painted clothing.

I found my hand in my jacket pocket, gripping Megan's

handgun. Being in this press of bodies was even worse than being exposed. With so many people around, I couldn't keep an eye on them all to watch for guns or knives.

Mizzy positioned me in front of the table, butting into a conversation among a group of older teenagers. "This," she declared, raising her hands to the side to present me like a new washer and dryer, "is my friend David Charleston. He's from out of town."

"Really!" said one of the people at the table, a tall guy with blue hair. "I'd never have been able to tell that from his boring clothing and goofy face."

I hated him immediately.

Mizzy punched the guy in the shoulder, grinning. "This is Calaka," she said to me, then pointed at the other three at the table—girl, boy, girl—in turn. "Infinity, Marco, and Lulu." She practically had to shout to make herself heard over the noise.

"So where *are* you from, new guy?" Calaka asked, taking a drink of glowing fruit juice. That did *not* look safe. "Someplace small, I'd guess, considering your wide eyes and overwhelmed expression."

"Yeah," I said. "Small."

"Your clothes *are* dull," said one of the girls, Infinity. Blonde and perky, she grabbed a can of something from under the table and shook it. Spraypaint. "Here, we can fix that."

I jumped back and threw my left hand out while firming my other hand's grip on the gun in my pocket. Everyone else in this crazy city could go around glowing as much as they wanted, but I wasn't *about* to make myself an easier target in the night.

The four flinched away from me, eyes widening. Mizzy took me by the arm. "It's okay, David. They're friends. Relax."

There was that word again. *Relax*.

"I just don't want any spraypaint on me," I said, trying to settle myself.

"Your friend is weird, Mizzy," Marco noted. He was a short guy with light brown hair so curly it looked like he'd stapled moss to his head. He leaned on the table in an easygoing posture, turning his cup with two fingers.

"I like him," Lulu said, eyeing me. "Quiet type. Tall, deep, sultry."

Deep?

Wait … sultry?

I focused on her. Curvaceous, dark skin, lustrous black hair that caught the light. Going to parties was partially about meeting girls, right? If I made a good impression, I might be able to ask her for information about Dawnslight or Regalia.

"Sooooo," Mizzy said, slumping against the table and stealing Marco's drink. "Anyone seen Steve around?"

"I don't think he's here," Calaka said. "At least, I haven't heard the sounds of anyone being slapped nearby."

"I think he was there," Infinity said, her tone becoming mellow. "The other day. Uptown."

"Bad business, that," Marco said.

The others nodded.

"Well," Calaka said. "Suppose we'd better raise a cup for old Steve, then. Creep though he was, if the Epics finally got 'im, he deserves a proper sendoff."

Marco reached to take his drink back, but Mizzy ducked to the side, clinking it against Calaka's and then drinking. Infinity and Lulu raised their cups as well.

They bowed their heads while Marco grabbed some glowing grapes off a plate on the food table and wandered back. I bowed my head as well. I didn't know this Steve guy, but he'd fallen to an Epic. That made him kindred, to an extent.

Marco began tossing the grapes to various members of the group. I caught one. Grapes, the nonglowing kind, had been a rare treat back in Newcago. We hadn't starved at the Factory, but much of the food had been stuff that stored well. Fruit was for the rich.

I popped it in my mouth. It tasted *fantastic*.

"Good music tonight," Marco noted, eating a grape.

"Edso's been getting better," Infinity agreed, grinning. "I think the heckling made a difference."

"Wait," I interrupted. "Aren't you worried about Obliteration? After what he did to your friend? You're just going to drink and move on?"

"What should we do?" Marco said. "Gotta keep living."

"Epics might come," Calaka agreed. "Could take you today, could take you tomorrow. But so might a heart attack. No reason not to party today, while you can."

"There were some shots fired at that one last night," Mizzy

said, speaking carefully. “Some people fighting back.”

“Idiots,” Calaka said. “Making things worse.”

“Yeah,” Infinity said. “Half the dead would still be alive if we just let the Epics do what they want. They always get bored and move on eventually.”

The others nodded, Marco cursing under his breath about the “sparking Reckoners.”

I blinked. Was this some kind of bad joke? But no, there was no mirth here—though I did notice Mizzy relaxing visibly. It appeared that although we’d fought back, she hadn’t been recognized. I wasn’t surprised; in the chaos of Obliteration’s destruction, news of what exactly had happened—and who had been involved—hadn’t likely been reliable in the city.

The group moved on to a further discussion of the music, and I just stood there feeling awkward and depressed. No wonder the Epics were winning, with attitudes like this.

At least they’re enjoying themselves, a piece of my mind noted. *Maybe there’s nothing they can do. Why judge them so harshly?*

It just felt that with some of us trying so hard, everyone should at least acknowledge the work we were putting in. We fought for the freedom of people like these. We were their heroes.

Weren’t we?

As the conversation progressed, Lulu sidled up to me, a cup of glowing blue juice in her hand. “This is boring,” she said, stretching up and leaning in close to speak into my ear. “Let’s dance, handsome.”

Handsome?

I hadn’t even managed a reply before Lulu was giving her cup to Marco and towing me away from the table. Mizzy gave me a little wave, but otherwise completely abandoned me as I was pulled through the crowd. To the dancing.

I guess that’s what you’d call it. It looked like everyone had insects in their shirts and were trying really hard to get them out. I’d seen dancing in movies, and it had seemed a lot more … coordinated than this.

Lulu dragged me into the center of it all, and I wasn’t about to admit I’d never danced before. So I started moving, trying my best to blend in by imitating what everyone else was doing. Though I felt like a cupcake on a steak plate, the other dancers were so absorbed in what they were doing, maybe they wouldn’t

notice me.

"Hey!" Lulu shouted. "You're good!"

I was?

She was better, always moving, seeming to anticipate the music and flowing with it. In the middle of a move, she threw herself my direction, wrapping her arms around me and pulling herself in close. It was unexpected, but not unpleasant.

Was I supposed to move with her, somehow? Having her that close was rather distracting. She barely knew me. *Is she an assassin, maybe?* a piece of me wondered.

No. She was just a normal person. And she seemed to like me, which was baffling. My only real experience with girls had been with Megan; how was I supposed to react to a girl who *didn't* immediately seem like she wanted to shoot me?

A little part of me figured I should ask about Dawnslight and Regalia—but that would be too obvious, right? I decided it was best to act natural for now, then try to get her to open up to me later.

So I just danced. Lulu had called me the quiet type. I could manage that, right? We continued for a while—long enough for sweat to start dripping down my brow as I tried to figure out the right way to dance. There didn't seem to be any form to it; Lulu alternated between gyrating around and pressing against me very close so we could move together. Several songs came and went, each different yet somehow the same.

Everyone else seemed to be having a great deal of fun. For me, it was stressful. I wanted to do it right and not give away that I'd never done this before. Lulu *was* attractive: warm face, great hair, curvaceous in all the right places. She wasn't Megan, not by a long shot, but she was here. And close. Should I talk to her? Tell her she was pretty?

I opened my mouth to say something, but the comment died on my lips. I found, in that moment, that I *really* didn't want to talk to another girl. It was stupid—Megan was an Epic. The entire time she'd been with the Reckoners, she'd probably been acting. Stringing us all along. I didn't even really know her.

But there was still a chance she'd been genuine, right?

I doubted Lulu carried grenades in her bra, ample though it was. She wouldn't know guns like Megan had. Lulu wasn't tough enough to bring down Epics, and that smile of hers was way too

inviting. Megan had been tough to crack, tough to make smile. That, in turn, made it all worthwhile when she *did* smile.

Stop it, I thought at myself. *Prof is right. You need to get Megan out of your head. Enjoy what you have right now*.

A guy nearby suddenly grabbed Lulu by the arm and whipped her in his direction. She laughed as the crowd churned to the demanding music. Just like that, she was gone.

I stopped in place. Searching through the throng of half-glowing figures, I finally found Lulu again. She was dancing with someone else. Sparks. Did she expect me to follow? Was this a test of some sort? Or was it a rejection? Why didn't school at the Factory involve important lessons, like how to deal with a party?

As I stood there, feeling stupid to be alone amid the dancing, I spotted something else. A face I thought I recognized. An Asian woman, punk clothing, like from the old days. And … It was Newton. Leader of the gangs of Babilar. Epic. She stood to the side of the dance floor, next to a table heaped with fruit that lit her face.

Oh, thank you, I thought, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief. Dancing was stressful—but murderous demigods, those I could deal with.

Hand in my pocket on the gun, I moved through the crowd to get a better look.

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I quickly dredged from my memory everything I knew about Newton. *Force redirection*, I thought. *That's her main power*. Slap Newton, and none of the energy would transfer to her—it would all reflect back at you. She could also move inhumanly fast. I'd had some things in my notes about her background and family, but I couldn't remember them. I briefly considered calling Tia, but with the music blaring I wasn't sure if she'd be able to hear me—or me her.

Newton began walking around the perimeter of the dancing area, moving with an unhurried gait. No super speed for the moment. I kept pace, pushing through the press of bodies and reaching a place where the crowd was less dense.

Newton walked like someone who knew she had the biggest gun in the room—confident, unconcerned. She didn't wear a single bit of spraypaint on her otherwise garish clothing: leather jacket, enormous cross-shaped earrings, piercings in her nose and lip. Short purple hair. She looked like she was about eighteen, but I thought I remembered something about her age being deceptive.

She could kill everyone at this party, I thought with a chill. *No consequences. Nobody would even question her. She's an Epic. It's her right.*

What was she doing here? Why was she just walking and watching? Of course, I didn't *mind* that she wasn't engaging in wholesale slaughter—but she had to have some kind of agenda. I pulled out my new mobile, the one Mizzy had given me. I thought she'd said …

Yes, she'd loaded it with photos of all known members of

Newton's gang. A few of those were minor Epics, and I wanted to be prepared. I shuffled through the photos quickly while keeping one eye on Newton. Was any of the rest of her team here?

I didn't spot any of them. Did that make her more or less likely to be up to something? I moved to get closer, but a hand caught me by the shoulder.

"David?" Mizzy asked. "Sparks, what are you doing?"

I lowered my mobile and turned, twisting Mizzy away in case Newton glanced in our direction. "Epic," I said. "Just ahead."

"Yeah, that's Newton," Mizzy said. "Why are you following her? Do you have a death wish?"

"Why's she here?" I asked, leaning down to hear Mizzy.

"It's a party."

"I know it is. But why is *she* here?"

"Uhhhh. For the party."

I paused. Epics went to *parties*?

I knew, logically, that sometimes Epics interacted with their lessers. In Newcago, Steelheart's favored had served, worked for, and even—in the case of the attractive ones—dated Epics. I just hadn't expected someone like Newton to be … hanging out. Epics were monsters. Killing machines.

No, I thought, watching Newton as she moved to the drink counter—where she was immediately served. *Creatures like Obliteration are killing machines. Other Epics are different*. Steelheart had wanted a city to rule, with subjects to worship him. Nightwielder had gone to meet with arms dealers, bringing assistants with him. Many Epics behaved like ordinary people, save for their absolute lack of morals.

Those types killed not because they enjoyed it, but because they got annoyed. Or, like Deathpoint—the Epic who had attacked the bank the day my father died—they killed because they figured it was just plain easier than the alternatives.

Newton got her drink, then leaned back against the bar, watching the crowd. Her gaze passed by Mizzy and me, not lingering. Either Regalia hadn't described us to Newton, or she didn't care that the Reckoners were at the party.

The Babilarans made way for her and averted their eyes when she looked in their direction. They didn't bow or give any obvious signs of subservience, but they clearly knew who she was. This was a lion among the gazelles; the lion just wasn't

hungry right now.

"Come on," Mizzy said, steering me back toward the dancing.

"What do you know about her?" I asked. "Her background, I mean. Who she was before Calamity." Fortunately, the current song was a little less overbearing than the previous ones, with a slower beat and not as much noise.

"Yunmi Park," Mizzy said. "That's her real name. Long ago, before all this happened, she was your run-of-the-mill black sheep. A juvenile delinquent born to successful parents who didn't know what to do about her."

"So she was evil even then?" I asked.

Mizzy started dancing—not as frantically or as, um, *invitingly* as Lulu had. Just some simple motions. The dancing was probably a good idea, as we didn't want to stand out. I followed suit.

"Yeaaaah," Mizzy said. "*Definitely* evil. She'd committed murder, so when Calamity arrived, she was already in juvie. Then *bam*. Super powers. Must have sucked to be the guards at that detention center that day, I tell you. But why does it matter what she was like?"

"I want to know what percentage of Epics were evil before they got their powers," I said. "I'm also trying to tie their weaknesses to events in their past."

"Hasn't anyone tried that before?"

"A lot of people have," I said. "But most of them didn't have the level of research I've been able to gather, or the access to Epics that being in the Reckoners has given me. The connection, if there is one, isn't obvious—but I think it's there. I just have to find the right slant on it…."

We danced for a few minutes. I could handle this dance. Less flailing was involved.

"What was it like?" Mizzy asked. "Killing Steelheart."

"Well, we set up in Soldier Field," I said. "We hadn't quite figured out his weakness yet, but we had to try anyway. So we made a perimeter, and—"

"No," Mizzy said. "What did it *feel* like to kill him? You know, inside of you. What was it like?"

"Is this pertinent to our current job somehow?" I asked, frowning.

Mizzy blushed and turned away. "Whoops. Personal information. Gotcha."

I hadn't intended to embarrass her; I'd just assumed I was missing something. I'd been too focused on the job at hand rather than on things like small talk and interpersonal interaction.

"It was awesome," I said softly.

Mizzy glanced back at me.

"I'd always heard that revenge doesn't pay off," I continued. "That when you finally got what you'd been hunting, you'd find the experience unsatisfying and depressing. That's a sparking load of *stupidity*. Killing that monster felt *great*, Mizzy. I avenged my father and liberated Newcago. I've never felt so good."

Mizzy nodded.

Now, what I didn't say was that killing Steelheart *had* left me wondering what to do next. The sudden and abrupt removal of my all-consuming goal … well, it was like I was a donut, and somebody had sucked all the jelly out of me. But I could stuff new jelly in there. It would just get my hands a little sticky in the process.

I'd moved on to killing other Epics, like Mitosis and Sourcefield. Which had its own problems. I'd interacted with Epics, even fallen for one. I couldn't see them uniformly as monsters any longer.

That look in Sourcefield's eyes as I shot her still haunted me. She'd looked so normal, so frightened.

"You take this all really seriously, don't you?" Mizzy asked.

"Don't we all?"

"Yeaaaah, you're a little different." She smiled. "I like it, though. You're what a Reckoner should be."

Unlike me, that line seemed to imply.

"I'm glad you have a life, Mizzy," I said. I gestured toward the party. "I'm glad you have friends. You don't want to be like me. Parties, real life … these are *why* we're fighting, in a way. To bring that world back."

"Even though Babilar is fake, like you think?" Mizzy said. "That this city, and everything in it, is a front for some plan Regalia is concocting?"

"Even then," I said.

Mizzy smiled, still shifting back and forth to the beat. She *was* cute. Not like Lulu at all, who was demandingly attractive. Mizzy was just … nice to be around. Earnest, amusing. *Real.*

I'd stayed away from people like her my entire life. I hadn't

wanted attachments, or so I'd told myself. Really, I'd been so focused that I'd kind of weirded everyone out. But Mizzy … she considered me a hero.

I could grow to enjoy this sort of thing. I wasn't interested in Mizzy—not *that* way, and particularly not with Megan on my mind—but friendship with some people my age was something I did find myself longing to have.

Mizzy seemed distracted by something. Perhaps she was thinking along similar lines. Or—

"I need to be more like you," she said. "I'm too trusting."

"I like you how you are."

"No," Mizzy said. "The person I am hasn't ever even killed an Epic. This time it's going to be different. I'm going to do what you did. I'm going to find that monster."

"That monster?" I said.

"Firefight," Mizzy said. "The one who killed Sam."

Oh.

Megan was far from a monster, but I couldn't explain that to Mizzy, not until I had proof of some sort.

For now, I changed the topic. "So, what did you find out from your friends? We're here for intel, right? Any clues that could lead us to … what we're looking for?" I didn't want to say it out loud, even though with the music—and with no water exposed to the air directly nearby—it was unlikely Regalia would be spying on us.

"I'm still looking, but I did find one interesting tidbit. Looks like Regalia has been bringing in scientists."

"Scientists?" I frowned.

"Yeah," Mizzy said. "Smart types of all kinds, apparently. Marco heard that a surgeon from Great Falls—one of Revokation's personal staff—relocated here. It's odd, as we don't have a lot of trained professionals in town. Babilar tends to attract people who like free food and fatalism, not scholars."

Huh. "See if any other professionals have come to town lately. Accountants. Military experts."

"Why?"

"Just a hunch," I said.

"Right. I'll get back to gathering intel." Mizzy hesitated. "Everything really *is* all about work for you, isn't it?"

Not by a mile. But I nodded anyway.

“I *am* going to find the Epic who murdered Sam,” Mizzy said. “Then I’m going to kill her.”

Sparks. I needed to clear Megan’s name, and quickly. Mizzy nodded to herself, looking resolute as she stepped out of the dancing area.

I went and checked on Newton as surreptitiously as I could. The Epic still lounged by the bar, sipping her drink, standing out like a punk guitarist in a mariachi band. Farther down the improvised bar—it was mostly made of old wooden boxes—Exel chatted with a group of women. They laughed at something he said, and the whole crowd of them looked sincerely interested in him.

Sparks. Exel was a *ladies’ man*? And at least *he* was sticking to the plan. I toyed with the idea of looking for Lulu so I could ask her if she’d ever seen Regalia. Instead I found myself walking to the bridge at the edge of the building, then out into the night, wanting to be alone with my thoughts for a while.

21

BABILAR was starting to grow on me.

True, all the color was garish, but I couldn't help but admire it just a little, particularly in contrast to the desolation between here and Newcago. Every glowing line coloring the walls and roofs here was a mark of humanity. A mixture of primitive cave paintings and modern technology, sprayed out of a can and humming with life all around me.

I walked down a bridge—different from the one we'd come in on. It led me to a quiet rooftop, with only a few deserted-looking tents and shanties. People preferred the roofs closer to the water level, it seemed. This one was a little too high.

I wasn't certain why more people didn't live inside the buildings. Wouldn't that be safer? Of course, the insides of the buildings were jungles—humid, shadowy, and obviously unnatural. Perhaps the rooftops were just something the people could claim.

I strolled for a time. Maybe I should have been worried about the danger, but sparks, Regalia had held us all in her grip—then let us go. This wasn't like Newcago, where Steelheart would have killed us in an eyeblink if he'd been able to find us. This was complicated. This was Epics and people living in a bizarre ecosystem, where the humans accepted that they might die at any moment—but still threw parties. Parties the Epics *themselves* might decide to visit.

Newcago had made far more sense. Steelheart at the top, lesser Epics beneath him, the favored serving them. The rest of us hiding in the corners. What sense did this city make?

Regalia has leashed the city's gangs, I thought. *And she's somehow*

been gaining the loyalty of powerful Epics. She lets the common people have all the food they want, and has now attracted at least one highly trained specialist.

That all spoke of someone who was planning to do what Steelheart had in creating a powerful city-state. Regalia made the place inviting to bring people in from outside, then she gained the loyalty of several Epics to use in building an aristocracy. But if that was the case, why unleash Obliteration? Why would she build a city like this—imposing law, working for peace—only to destroy it? It made no sense.

Footsteps.

Growing up in the understreets of Newcago taught you a few things. The first was to jump the moment you thought someone was sneaking up on you. If you were lucky, it was just a mugger. If you were unlucky, you were dead.

I backed up against the side of a wooden shanty, crouching down and staying out of sight. Blue paint glowed out from behind me. *Idiot*, I thought. *This isn't Newcago. It's normal for people to wander around here.* There was probably no need to have hidden so quickly. I peeked up.

And found Newton crossing the rooftop at a prowl. She passed by in near silence, her figure dark against the spraypainted ground. She didn't seem to have spotted me.

I ducked back down, sweating. Where was she going? I hesitated briefly, considering my options, and then peeked out to watch her cross the roof.

Then I followed her.

This is stupid, a part of me thought. I had no preparation, no plan to negate her powers. She was a High Epic—her powers actively protected her from harm. If my surveillance went poorly, I wouldn't be able to simply shoot her, as my bullets would bounce back at me.

But she was involved with Regalia directly. Whatever was really going on in this city, Newton would be part of it, and watching her might give me important information. I moved in a crouch, taking cover behind old shanties as I tailed her. When I had to cross out into the open I did so quickly, and only once Newton had gotten far enough ahead. The buildings in this stretch were all about the same height and had been built very close together; you didn't even need bridges to cross from one to

the other, though ramps did connect some where the height difference was larger than a few feet.

I kept pace with her, and in so doing passed a few people lounging against the side of the otherwise-deserted building. Their clothing glowed with green paint, and they gave me a strange look before glancing toward Newton.

Then they scrambled to hide. Sparks. I was glad they had some sense to them, but I didn't want their sudden motion to startle her. I hid beside a fallen wall.

Newton turned toward a long rope bridge. Sparks, that would be difficult to cross inconspicuously. How would I follow? Instead of crossing the bridge, however, Newton hopped off the side of the building. I frowned, then took a deep breath and snuck up to the edge of the roof. A small balcony rested below, with an open doorway leading into the building itself.

Right. Inside the building. Where my visibility would be limited, and I might stumble into a trap. Of course. I swung over the side and carefully climbed down to the balcony, then peeked in through the doorway.

The glowing fruit here had been harvested recently, probably for the party several rooftops over. That left the place dark, only a few phantom pieces of immature fruit giving light. It smelled of humidity—of that strange scent of plants and earth that was so different from the pristine steel of Newcago.

A rustling sound in the distance indicated the direction that Newton had gone. I climbed in through the broken doorway and followed cautiously. This had been a bedroom, judging by the bed overgrown with vines spilling onto the floor. I glanced out the door and found a narrow hallway. No—not a bedroom … a hotel room.

The confines were cramped—these rooms hadn't been large in the first place, and a hallway lined with trees didn't help. How *did* these plants live in here? I snuck forward, crawling over piled-up roots, when a dangling half-grown fruit tapped the side of my head.

Then it started blinking.

I stopped immediately, turning my head and staring at the strange fruit. Looked like a pear, and it was blinking off and on like a neon sign from one of the old movies. What …?

"They were at the party," a female voice said.

Sparks! It came from a room just ahead of me. I'd almost crept right past, oblivious of the open doorway. I ignored the fruit, sneaking up and listening. "Three of them. Steelslayer left early. I followed, but lost him."

Was that Newton talking?

"You *lost* him?" That deep voice was familiar. Obliteration. "I thought you didn't do that."

"I don't." Frustration in her tone. "It's like he vanished."

Sparks. I felt a chill run up my arms and wash across my body. Newton had been *following* me?

Quite aware that I was exhibiting a special brand of crazy, I peeked into the room. The foliage had been cleared away inside, the plants chopped down, opening up the small hotel room, making its bed and desk usable. One of the windows even still had intact glass, though the other was open to the air.

It was dark inside, but some spraypaint around the window gave just enough light for me to see Obliteration. He stood in his long black trench coat with hands clasped behind his back, looking out the window toward a city full of neon paint and partying people. Newton lounged beside the wall, spinning a katana in one hand.

What was it with people in this city and swords?

"You should not have allowed that one to slip away from you," Obliteration said.

"Because you did such a good job of killing him?" Newton snapped. "Against orders, I might add."

"I follow the orders of no man, mortal or Epic," Obliteration said softly. "I am the cleansing fire."

"Yeah. Whatever, creepshow."

Obliteration raised an arm to the side in an almost absent motion, holding a long-barreled handgun. Of *course* he'd have a .357. I plugged my ears right as he pulled the trigger.

The bullet deflected. I could actually see it happen, which I hadn't expected. A little flash of light from Newton, and a drawer in the desk near Obliteration exploded, wood chips scattering. The punk woman stood up straight, looking annoyed as Obliteration fired five more shots at her. Each one bounced off harmlessly.

I watched with fascination, my rational fear evaporating. What an incredible power. Hawkham in Boston had used force

redirection, but bullets that bounced off him had usually ripped apart in midair. Here, the bullets *actually* changed direction, shooting backward away from her. How did they not collapse in the sudden change of trajectory?

They didn't fly well, as far as I could tell from what I was seeing. Bullets weren't meant to fly backward.

Obliteration lowered the gun.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Newton demanded.

"To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear?" Obliteration said, passionless. "Behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken."

"You're crazy."

"And you are very good with a sword," Obliteration said softly. "I admire your skill."

I frowned. What? Newton seemed to consider the remark odd as well, as she hesitated, lowering the katana and staring at him.

"Are you done shooting at me?" Newton finally said, sounding disturbed. Glad to hear I wasn't the only one who found Obliteration supremely unnerving. "Because I want to get back. I'm hungry, and the food at that party was pathetic. Nothing but homegrown fruit."

Obliteration didn't glance at her. He whispered something, and I struggled to hear. I leaned forward.

"Corrupt," Obliteration whispered. "All men are corrupt. The seed of the Epic is inside each one. And so, all must die. Mortal and immortal. All are—"

I slipped.

Though I caught myself quickly, my booted foot scraped across some bark. Obliteration spun, and Newton stood up straight, raising the katana in a firm grip.

Obliteration looked right at me.

But he didn't seem to see me.

He frowned, looking past where I crouched, then shook his head. He strode over to Newton and took her by one arm. Then both teleported, a crash of light leaving behind glowing figures that crumbled away into nothing.

I righted myself, sweat streaming down the sides of my face, heart thumping.

I'd somehow managed to shake Newton without even realizing I was being followed. I didn't accept that my quick duck out of

the way had been enough, not if she'd been actively tailing me. Now this.

"All right, Megan," I said. "I know you're there."

Silence.

"I have your gun," I said, taking out the handgun. "Really nice weapon. P226, custom rubber grip, finger grooves, worn down a little on the sides. Looks like you took a lot of time fitting this to your hand."

Silence.

I walked to the window and held the gun out of it. "Probably sinks really well too. It would be a shame if—"

"If you drop that, you idiot," Megan's voice said from the hallway outside, "I'll rip your face off."

22

MEGAN! Sparks, it was good to hear her voice. The last time I'd heard it, she'd pulled a gun on me.

Megan stepped from the shadows of the hallway. She looked wonderful.

The first time I'd seen her—way back when I'd been trying to join the Reckoners—she'd been wearing a sleek red dress, her golden hair tumbling down around her shoulders. Her narrow features had been accented by blush and eye shadow, tied with a bow of bright red lipstick on her lips. Now she wore a sturdy army-style jacket and jeans, her hair pulled back in a utilitarian ponytail. And she was way more beautiful. This was the real Megan, with one holster under her arm and another on her hip.

Seeing her brought back memories. Of a chase through Newcago, of gunfire and exploding copters. Of a desperate flight, carrying her wounded in my arms, followed by an impossible rescue.

She'd died anyway. But not, I'd discovered, for good. I couldn't help grinning at the sight of her. Megan, in turn, raised a nine-millimeter square at my chest.

Well, that was familiar, at least.

"You spotted that I was interfering," Megan said. "Which means I've grown predictable. Either that or you know too much. You've always known too much."

I looked down at the gun. You never get used to having one pointed at you. In fact, the more you know about guns, the more disconcerting it is to face one down. You know exactly what they can do to people—and you know that a professional like Megan does not point a weapon at someone without being prepared to

shoot.

"Um … it's good to see you too?" I said, pulling my arm—with Megan's gun in it—carefully out of the window, then dropped the gun to the floor in a nonthreatening way and kicked it gently in her direction. "I'm unarmed. You can lower the gun, Megan. I just want to talk."

"I should shoot you," Megan said. Keeping her gun trained on me, she stooped to retrieve the other one from the floor with her left hand, then slipped it into a pocket.

"What sense would that make?" I asked. "After you saved me from drowning the other day, and then saved me again tonight when Newton was tailing me? Thanks for both, by the way."

"Newton and Obliteration think you're dangerous," Megan said.

"And … you disagree?"

"Oh, you're dangerous. Just not in the way that they—or you—think. You're dangerous because you make people believe you, David. You make them listen to your crazy ideas. Unfortunately, the world *can't* be what you want it to be. You're not going to overthrow the Epics."

"We overthrew Steelheart."

"With the help of two Epics," Megan snapped. "How long would you and the team have survived in Newcago without Prof's shields and healing abilities? Sparks! You've only been here in Babilar a couple of days and you'd be dead *already* without my help. You can't fight them, David."

"Well," I said, stepping forward despite that gun—which was still pointed right at me. "I should think that your examples only prove that we *can* fight the Epics. So long as we have the help of other Epics."

Her expression shifted, lips tightening, eyes hardening. "You realize Phaedrus will turn on you. You've hired the lion to protect you from the wolves, but either will be happy to eat you once the food runs out."

"I—"

"You don't know what it's like, inside! You shouldn't trust us. *Any* of us. Even the little bit I did just now, protecting you from those two, threatens to destroy me." She hesitated. "You'll receive no further help from me." She turned to walk back into the corridor.

"Megan!" I said, feeling a sudden panic. I'd come all this way

to find her. I couldn't let her go now! I scrambled out into the hallway after her.

She strode away from me, a dark silhouette barely visible by the light of a few dangling pieces of fruit.

"I've missed you," I said.

She didn't stop.

This wasn't how I'd imagined our meeting. It wasn't supposed to have been about Prof, or the Epics; it was supposed to have been about her. And about me.

I needed to say something. Something romantic! Something to sweep her off her feet.

"You're like a potato!" I shouted after her. "In a minefield."

She froze in place. Then she spun on me, her face lit by a half-grown fruit. "A potato," she said flatly. "That's the best you can do? Seriously?"

"It makes sense," I said. "Listen. You're strolling through a minefield, worried about getting blown up. And then you step on something, and you think, 'I'm dead.' But it's just a potato. And you're so relieved to find something so wonderful when you expected something so awful. That's what you are. To me."

"A potato."

"Sure. French fries? Mashed potatoes? Who doesn't like potatoes?"

"Plenty of people. Why can't I be something sweet, like a cake?"

"Because cake wouldn't grow in a minefield. Obviously."

She stared down the hallway at me for a few moments, then sat on an overgrown set of roots.

Sparks. She seemed to be crying. *Idiot!* I thought at myself, scrambling through the foliage. *Romantic. You were supposed to be romantic, you slontze!* Potatoes weren't romantic. I should have gone with a carrot.

I reached Megan in the dim hallway and hesitated, uncertain if I dared touch her. She looked up at me, and though there *were* tears in the corners of her eyes, she wasn't weeping.

She was laughing.

"You," she said, "are an utter fool, David Charleston. I wish you weren't also so adorable."

"Uh … thanks?" I said.

She sighed and repositioned herself on the large set of roots,

pulling her feet up and sitting with her back in the crook of the tree trunk. That seemed an invitation, so I sat down in front of her, my knees before me and my back to the wall of the corridor. I could see well enough, though this entire place was creepy, with its shadowed vines and strange plants.

"You don't know what this is like, David," she whispered.

"So tell me."

She focused on me. Then she turned her gaze upward. "It's like being a child again. Can you remember how it felt, when you were really young, and everything was about *you*? Nothing else matters but your needs, your wants. Thinking about others is impossible—they just don't enter into your mind. Other people are an annoyance, a frustration. They just get in your way."

"You resisted it before."

"No, I *didn't*. In the Reckoners, I was forced to avoid using my powers. I didn't resist the changes. I never felt them."

"So do it that way again."

She shook her head. "I barely managed it before. By the time I was killed, I was practically going crazy from the need to use my abilities. I'd started to find excuses, and that was changing me."

"You seem okay now."

She toyed with her gun, flicking the weapon's safety on and off, her eyes still upward. "It's easier around you. I don't know why."

Well, that was something. It made me think. "Maybe it has to do with your weakness."

She looked at me sharply.

"Just consider it," I said carefully, not wanting to ruin things at the moment. "It might be relevant."

"You think it's what's making me act like myself," she snapped. "You think that somehow being around you triggers my weakness, and that's making me normal. Things don't work like that, David. If being around you negated my powers, I wouldn't have been able to save you—or hide among the Reckoners. Sparks! If that were the case, every time a weakness triggered, the Epic would be like, 'What the hell? Why am I being evil? Let's totally get along, guys, and go bowling together or something.' "

"Well, there's no need to get snarky about it."

She pinched the bridge of her nose with her off hand. "I shouldn't even be here with you. What am I doing?"

"You're talking to a friend," I said. "That's something you

probably need these days."

She looked at me, then glanced away.

"We don't have to talk about this in particular," I said. "Or about Newcago, or the Reckoners, or anything like that. Just talk to me, Megan. Is that a 24/7?"

She raised the handgun. "Yeah."

"Generation three?"

"Generation two compact, nine-millimeter," she grumbled. "I like the feel of the G2 better than the G3, but the sparking things are hard to find parts for. I have to use something small—can't let the others know I need a gun. They see it as a weakness around here."

"What, really?"

Megan nodded. "Real Epics kill with their powers in some kind of flashy way. We like to show off. I've had to get really good with the gun so I can fake my powers killing people, sometimes."

"Wow," I said. "So when we were fighting Fortuity, way back when, and you shot him out of the air …"

"Yeah. No cheating involved. I don't have hyper-reflexes or anything like that. I'm kind of a pitiful excuse for an Epic."

"Uh … you came back from the dead. That's rather less than pitiful, if you weren't aware."

She smiled. "Do you have *any* idea how much it sucks to have your High Epic status granted by reincarnation? Dying *hurts*. And it wipes a lot of my memories from right before the event. All I remember is dying, and pain, and a black, icy nothingness. I wake up the next morning with the agony and terror dominating my thoughts." She shivered. "I'd rather have forcefields or something to protect me."

"Yeah, but if your forcefields go all Vincin on you, you're dead for good. Reincarnating is more reliable."

"Vincin?" she said. "Like the gun brand?"

"Yeah, they're—"

"Always jamming," Megan finished, nodding. "And about as accurate as a blind man pissing during an earthquake."

"Wow …," I breathed.

She frowned at me.

"That was a *great* metaphor," I said.

"Oh please."

"I need to write that down," I said, ignoring her complaints,

fishing for my new mobile to type it out. I looked up at her as I finished, and she was smiling.

"What?" I asked.

"We're not doing a very good job of not talking about Epics," she said. "I'm sorry."

"I guess it was a lot to expect. I mean, it's kind of who you are. Besides awesome. As awesome as a—"

"Potato?"

"—a blind man pissing during an earthquake," I said, reading from my mobile's screen. "Hum. Doesn't exactly work in this situation, does it?"

"No. Not quite."

"I'll have to find another place to use it then," I said with a grin, tucking away the mobile. I stood up, holding my hand out to her.

Megan hesitated, then took something from her pocket and put it in my hand. A small black object, like a mobile battery.

I frowned. "The hand was to help you to your feet."

"I know," Megan said, standing up. "I don't like being helped."

"What's this?" I asked, holding up the little flat square.

"Ask Phaedrus," she said.

Standing had placed her right in front of me, very close. She was tall, almost exactly my height.

"I've never met anyone like you," I said softly, lowering my hand.

"Is that what you told that bouncing bundle of breasts and booty you were dancing with at the party?"

I winced. "You, uh, saw that?"

"Yeah."

"Stalker."

"The Reckoners came to my town," Megan said. "It is in an Epic's interests to keep tabs on them."

"Then you know that I wasn't exactly enjoying myself while at the party."

"I'll admit," Megan said, stepping forward, "that I had trouble telling if you were trying to smash an angry swarm of bugs at your feet, or if you were just really bad at dancing."

That step put her close to me. Really close. She met my eyes.

Now or never.

Heart thumping crazily, I closed my eyes and leaned in. I

immediately felt something cold against my temple.

I opened my eyes to find Megan had leaned in, her lips almost to mine, but then had raised her gun and pressed it against the side of my head. “You’re doing it again,” she said, almost a growl. “Distorting the truth, making people go along with your craziness. This thing between us isn’t going to work.”

“We’ll make it work.”

“Maybe I don’t want it to. Maybe I want to be hard. Maybe I don’t want to like people. Maybe I’ve *never* wanted to like people, even before Calamity.”

I held her eyes, ignoring the gun to my head. I smiled.

“Bah,” she said, pulling the gun away. She stalked off down the corridor, brushing the fronds of a fern. “Don’t follow. I need to think.”

I stayed put, though I did watch her until she was gone. I fingered the batterylike item she’d given me, feeling a lingering pleasure—for as she’d left, I’d glanced at her gun.

This time, when she’d pointed it at me, she’d flicked the safety on. If that wasn’t true love, I don’t know what was.

23

EXEL strapped the spyril onto me. It was sleeker than I'd expected it to be; the only bulky parts were two large, canisterlike tubes that attached to my calves. A nozzle extended from the back of my right hand, the opening as large as a common hose; it was secured into a black glove with an attached wrist brace. The setup inhibited my wrist motion a little.

My left hand had a different kind of glove on it, with a few odd devices on the back about the shape of two rolls of coins. I prodded at these.

"I'd avoid playing with those if I were you," Exel said affably. "Unless you want to rush your funeral along. I happen to know of a wonderful place in Babilar that sells lilies year-round."

"You're a strange man," I said, though I lowered my hands to my sides per his warning.

"Mizzy?" Exel asked.

"Looks good," she said, walking around and inspecting me. She knelt down and tugged on the line running from my foot to the back portion and nodded. She seemed to know a lot about things like this, particularly Epic-derived technology. When I'd come back with the motivator that Megan had given me—explaining that I'd followed Newton and that she'd dropped it—Mizzy had been the one to run it through tests and determine that everything was all right.

The three of us were on a rooftop in northern Babilar, away from populated areas in a section where only the rare building peeked from the surface of the water. No bridges led between them. Aside from that it was daytime, when most people would be sleeping.

I wore a wetsuit with the spyril, and I pointedly ignored how nervous that made me. Before agreeing to equip me with the device, Mizzy had insisted on teaching me some basic swimming strokes. Almost a week had passed since my meeting with Megan. I was getting pretty good at swimming—or, well, pretty good at not panicking when I got in the water. That was the majority of the battle, I supposed.

I still hadn't figured out a design for foot spikes to stop potential shark attacks. Hopefully I wouldn't need them.

Prof surveyed from the other side of the rooftop. He wore his black lab coat, goggles stuffed into the pocket. He didn't believe my lie about having found the spyril's motivator in the room after spying on Obliteration and Newton. I'd been tempted to tell him about Megan. I'd find a time soon enough. When Mizzy, Val, or Exel weren't around. I didn't think they'd react well to hearing that I'd had a pleasant conversation with the Epic who had supposedly killed their friend.

She didn't do it, I thought to myself for the thousandth time as Mizzy pulled my arm strap tight. *Even if she did have the spyril's motivator*.

"All right," Mizzy said, finally. "Done!"

"Congratulations," Exel said. "You're now wearing the most dangerous piece of equipment we own."

"Where are the rest of the tubes?" I asked, frowning. The canisters and gloves were each attached with some small wires—which were strapped securely to my arms and legs—to a circular device on my back, where Mizzy had installed the motivator.

"No tubes needed," Mizzy said.

"None? No pumps, hoses …"

"Nope."

"I'm pretty sure that doesn't make any sense."

"I'm pretty sure you're wearing a freaky, Epic-derived weapon," Mizzy said. "The tensors vaporize metal. This is a stroll in the park compared to that. Granted, our local park is completely submerged.…"

I raised my right hand, making a fist. The wetsuit covering my arm *scrunched* as I moved. Her explanation bothered me. Shouldn't we know how things like this actually worked? Of course, I didn't understand how computers or mobiles worked either, and that didn't bother me. Those didn't have mysterious

motivators, though, and weren't built after studying the cells of dead Epics.

And they also didn't, so far as I knew, defy the laws of physics.

Those were probably questions for another day. For now, I needed to focus on the task at hand: learning to use the spyril. "So how does it work?"

"This," Mizzy said, taking my left hand and flipping a switch, "is the streambeam. You point it at water and make a fist."

"Streambeam?" I asked dryly.

"I named it," Mizzy said happily.

I inspected the glove. One of the coin-roll devices on the back kind of looked like a laser pointer. I stepped to the edge of the roof and pointed my left hand at the water just below, then made a fist.

A bright red laser shot from my left hand. Even in full daylight, even with no smoke or anything dusting the air, I could see the beam easily. The device on my back started to hum.

"The streambeam draws out water," Exel said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Or … well, teleports the water to you, or something like that."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Now, you have to be careful," Mizzy said, "as your other hand will control the flow. You need to—"

I made a fist with my right hand. Jets of water *erupted* from my feet, flipping me into the air end over end. I shouted, flailing my arms. The streambeam twisted toward the sky, then turned off as I was no longer making a fist. The jets immediately cut out.

The world spun around me, drops of water spraying everywhere, then the force of the ocean hit me as I crashed into it. It was a huge shock, even with Prof's forcefield to protect me. Brackish water sprayed into my mouth and up my nose. For a brief, terrified moment my mind was *convinced* I was drowning to death.

I thrashed, remembering the time before when I'd been towed down by the weight on my ankle. My panic was accompanied by a deeper, more ancient terror—a primal fear of drowning mixed with a fear of what could be out there, in those depths, watching me.

I struggled to the surface, sputtering, and swam awkwardly to

the rooftop. I grabbed hold of a partially submerged windowsill and wiped my face, trying to catch my breath, stilling my nerves. Even with the wetsuit, I felt cold.

A laugh bellowed out from up above. Exel. He reached down, and I took hold, letting him help me from the water. I sat on the side of the roof, pulling my legs up. No reason to give the sharks —which I was sure were down there—anything to chew on.

"Well, it works!" Exel said.

"Let me check the flow rates," Mizzy said, kneeling beside me. Today with her jeans she wore a shirt that had frills cut along the hem. Behind the two of them Prof stood with crossed arms, his expression dark.

"Sir?" I called to him.

"Carry on with the practice," he said, turning away. "I have things to take care of. Exel and Mizzy, you can handle this?"

"Sure can," Exel said. "I coached Sam his first few times. Never did try it myself though."

Made sense. I figured it would take some *serious* jets to lift Exel.

Prof stepped onto our boat tied up alongside the rooftop, then took out a paddle. "Contact Val via mobile when you want to be picked up," he said. Then he rowed away toward where we'd hidden the submarine.

"What's up with him lately?" Exel asked.

"Up?" Mizzy asked from behind me as she fiddled with the device on my back. "He's always like that, so far as I can tell. Brooding. Dark. Mysterious." I sensed a blush to her voice, and she ducked down a little farther.

"True," Exel said. "But lately the mystery comes with extra brood." He shook his head and settled down beside me. "David, when manipulating the spyril you *have* to keep the streambeam pointed at water. The moment it isn't, you'll lose access to your propellant, and that will send you crashing down."

"Well," I said, "at least the landing will be soft, right?" I nodded toward the water.

"You've never belly flopped, have you?" Exel asked.

"Belly what?"

Exel rubbed his forehead with a set of meaty fingers. "Okay. David, water doesn't compress. If you hit it at high speed, particularly with a lot of your body at once, it will feel like hitting something solid. Drop from a hundred feet or so, and

you'll break bones. Maybe die."

That sounded bizarre, but it didn't really matter so long as I had one of Prof's forcefields protecting me, disguised as a little electronic box hooked to my wetsuit belt. Since he often split the power among several Reckoners at once, it would wear out over time, and focused points of pressure—such as a bullet strike—could penetrate it. But a fall into the water shouldn't be a problem.

"A hundred feet, you say?" I asked. "This thing can get me that high?"

Exel nodded. "And higher. Sam couldn't reach the tops of the tallest skyscrapers, but he could reach many of the medium-height ones."

Mizzy stopped fiddling with my back. "I dialed down the flows," she said. "So you can practice without quite as much force at first."

"I don't need to be coddled," I said.

Exel looked at me seriously, then rested a hand on my shoulder. "I joke about death, David. It's an occupational hazard—you learn to laugh at it when it's all around you. But we already lost one point man from this team. Wouldn't it be silly to lose another one while practicing? What happened just a few moments ago could easily have ended with you flipping into the air, then driving yourself face-first into the rooftop at high speed."

I took a deep breath, feeling foolish. "Of course. You're right." Prof's protections were good, but not infallible. "I'll take it easy at first."

"Then stand back up, Steelslayer, and let's get to it."

24

IT turned out that the difficulty in using the spyril didn't have to do with its power. After a half hour of working, we had Mizzy up the strength of the water jets, as they provided a better footing that way.

The trouble was with balance. Trying to remain stable with two shifting jets of water coming out from your legs was like trying to balance a pot full of frogs on the tips of two half-cooked pieces of spaghetti. And I had to do it while keeping my left arm always pointed downward at the water, or I'd lose my power. I could use my right hand for stabilizing, fortunately. That one had what Mizzy called a handjet strapped to it. With it I could shoot out streams of water to adjust my balance, but usually I overcompensated.

It was all pretty complicated. Left hand with the streambeam had to stay pointed at water. Right hand opening and closing would adjust the strength of the water coming out my footjets, and the right thumb would control the strength of the handjet. But I couldn't use that to stabilize unless I remembered to point it the direction I was falling, which—when you're trying to juggle all of this in your mind—was easier said than done.

Eventually I managed to accomplish a stable hover about fifteen feet above the water. I wavered there, using the handjet to shoot a stream backward to keep from falling when I began to topple in that direction.

"Nice!" Exel called up from below. "Like walking on flexible stilts, eh? That's how Sam put it."

Well, if you wanted to be *pedestrian* with your metaphors.

I lost my balance and crashed back down into the water,

relaxing my right hand and stopping the jets. I came up sputtering but let myself float there for a moment, Exel and Mizzy standing above me and looking down.

Falling again was annoying, but I wouldn't let myself get discouraged. I'd had to practice for weeks with the tensors before getting the hang of those.

Something brushed my leg.

I knew it was probably just a piece of garbage moving in the lazy current, but I jerked my legs up and instinctively made a fist. So, when water jetted from my feet, I shot backward like a fleshy speedboat. I released my hand almost immediately, surprised by how easily I'd moved.

I turned around, face forward and legs back so I was on my stomach, and tried the jets again. I eased into the power until I was moving at a decent clip—about as fast as I'd seen Mizzy swimming the day before when she'd been giving me instructions. I checked my goggles and nose plugs to make sure they were secure.

Then I increased the speed.

For some reason, even though my feet were pointed straight back, this spat me out of the water so that I flew just above the surface. It was quick, lasting only a few seconds before I plunged into the water again face-first.

Wow, I thought, surfacing and then spurting from the water again in a splash.

I relaxed my hand, slowing my momentum, then put myself upright. The small amount of force coming from the jets raised me up out of the water about to my waist, the water churning in a donutlike ring around me.

I'd gotten going pretty quickly back there. Could I go even faster? I let myself sink back into the water, then stuck my feet out behind me again and put the jets on full blast, shooting face-first like a torpedo. Water sprayed off me as I splashed up and down, thrilled by the speed. I got the hang of this power-swimming much more quickly than I had the hovering; I was having so much fun that I almost forgot I was in the water.

Eventually I swam up to the others and stopped the jets. Above, Mizzy was gasping. "That," she said, tears in the corners of her eyes, "was one of the most *ridiculous* things I've ever seen."

"You said 'awesome' wrong," I grumbled. "Did you see how fast

I was going?"

"You looked like a porpoise," Mizzy said.

"An *awesome* porpoise?"

"Sure." She laughed.

Beside her, Exel was smiling. He knelt down and reached out to help me from the water, but I engaged the jets and shot up at an angle. I managed to land on the rooftop beside them without falling on my face, though much arm-waving was involved.

Mizzy laughed again and tossed me a towel. I settled down on one of the chairs, shivering. Spring might be upon us, but the air was still chilly. I accepted a cup of hot tea from Exel as he settled down beside me and put in his earpiece. I followed suit.

"That water," I said, speaking in the soft way of the Babilaran Reckoners, "doesn't seem as cold as it should be." I realized, now that I was in the open air and shivering, that it was warmer in the water than out of it.

"It isn't," Exel said. "And it's even warmer down in the southern parts of Babilar. There are currents that move through the streets bearing a tropical warmth all times of year, even midwinter."

"That sounds …" I trailed off.

"Impossible?" Exel volunteered.

"Yeah," I said. "But I realize how stupid that sounds, considering everything else happening in this city."

Exel nodded, and we sat for a while, me chowing down on a sandwich I'd dug out of my pack.

"So," Exel said, "are we done for the day?"

"Nah," I said, munching the last bite of sandwich. "We've only been out here for an hour or two. I want to get this *down*. Just let me rest for a minute and I'll get back to it."

Mizzy took a seat and checked her mobile. "Val reports that Newton is in Eastborough right now. No movement this direction. It doesn't look like we've been spotted."

I nodded and took a pull on the tea as I thought. It was sweeter than I was used to. "We'll need to figure out her weakness, if we can."

"I'd rather find out Obliteration's," Exel said. "He scares me."

"He should."

I'd spent the week thinking about Megan, but I probably should have let Obliteration dominate more of that time. Why had he

suddenly decided to vaporize Houston? And then in rapid succession two other towns? What had changed, and why had I been wrong about the cooldown on his teleportation powers?

I pulled out my new mobile and searched through the digitized version of my notes. It wasn't too different from my old one, though a few of Mizzy's improvements—such as a slow-charging solar panel on the back—seemed like they'd be useful.

I stopped at a photo of Obliteration, taken in Houston only a few days before he'd destroyed the place. I'd traded half my rations for two weeks to another kid in the Factory for a copy of the photo, which he'd had forwarded on to him from a friend.

In the picture, Obliteration sat in the middle of a city square, cross-legged, basking in the sun with eyes closed and face turned toward the sky. A few days later, Houston was gone—which had shocked me, as I assumed he would remain emperor of the city for years, like Steelheart in Chicago. Nothing I'd read about him had prepared me for such an event.

My notes had been wrong about him. Consistently, not just regarding his powers, but also his motives and intentions. I thought a moment, then pulled up Val's number and pressed the call button.

"Yo," she said softly.

"Mizzy says you're still on reconnaissance," I said.

"Yeah. What do you need?"

"Has anyone spotted Obliteration sitting out in the sun?" I asked. "Here in the city, I mean?"

"Don't know," Val said. "There are lots of rumors about him, but not much concrete info."

I looked up at Exel sitting in his chair beside me. He shrugged. "I can try to find out more if you'd like," he offered.

"Thanks," I said. "Val, just keep your eyes open, all right? I think Obliteration needs to charge himself that way; it's how he acted in the other cities before he destroyed them. We'll want to know if he starts doing that here."

"Right." Val signed off.

"We're worrying about him too much," Mizzy said. She sat by the edge of the rooftop, idly tossing broken chips of brick into the water.

Exel chuckled softly, then spoke over the line. "Well, he *is* the one who is likely to try to melt the city, Missouri."

“I suppose. But what about *Firefight*?” Mizzy stared out over the waters, her brow furrowed in an uncharacteristic way. Angry. “She’s the one who killed Sam. She infiltrated the Reckoners, betrayed us. She’s a fire Epic too, like Obliteration. Why aren’t we talking about how to kill her?”

Fire Epic. I was pretty sure that she wasn’t actually—she was some kind of illusion Epic—though honestly I didn’t know the extent of what she could do. There was something odd about the images she created, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“What did Prof tell you about Firefight?” I asked Mizzy and Exel, curious.

Mizzy shrugged. “I have the Reckoners’ files on her, though they thought ‘she’ was a ‘he.’ Fire Epic; has an aura of flame about her that melts bullets. Can fly, shoot fire.”

None of that was actually true, and Prof knew it. Why hadn’t he told the team Megan was really an illusionist, and had no fire manipulation powers? I certainly wasn’t going to explain—not when I didn’t know why Prof was keeping quiet. Besides, as long as Mizzy was still after Megan, it was safer if this team didn’t know Megan’s true nature.

“The files don’t have anything about her weakness though,” Mizzy said, looking at me hopefully.

“I have no idea what it is,” I said. “She didn’t seem too bad when she was with us….”

“Had you fooled right good,” Mizzy said, sounding sympathetic. “Yeaaah, I suppose we should be lucky she didn’t try that with us. It would be even harder if she’d made herself our friend first, then started killing us.” She still looked angry as she fetched herself a cup of tea.

I stood up, setting aside the towel. I still had the spyril strapped on, jets on the backs of my calves, gloves on my hands. “I’m going to go practice that swimming thing some more.”

“Just watch out for people,” Exel said. “Don’t let them see you—we wouldn’t want to ruin the reputation of the Reckoners by acting so silly.”

“Eee, eee,” Mizzy squealed like a dolphin.

“Great,” I said, fighting off a blush. “Thanks. That’s very encouraging.” I removed my earpiece and tucked it into the waterproof pocket on my wetsuit, then replaced my swimming goggles and nose plugs.

I hopped back into the water and did a few more circuits of the rooftop. It *was* fun, even if it was in the water. Besides, I was moving too quickly for sharks to catch me, I figured.

Eventually, when I felt like I had the hang of it, I turned away from the rooftop and ventured into the open water of what had once been Central Park. It was now a large expanse without anything breaking the surface—which was perfect for me, as it meant I didn't risk shooting down into the water and smashing into a barely submerged roof or spire.

I closed my right hand almost to a fist and picked up speed, then splashed through the water—popping out and then crashing back down, over and over. It was exciting at first, but eventually grew monotonous. I forced myself onward. I had to master this device—we were going to need the edge.

Prof's forcefield energy seemed to protect me; I suspected that without his help, my head and face would be taking more of a battering. As it was, I barely felt it. After crossing the entire park in a matter of minutes, I burst from the surface, shooting straight up, then managed to balance on the streams of water and stay in place some twenty feet above the ocean. As I started to tip, I raised my other hand and used the smaller jet on the back of the right-hand glove—controlled by my thumb—to knock me back into place.

Excited that I'd managed to balance, I grinned—then accidentally overcorrected with the handjet. I crashed back down into the ocean, but I was getting used to this. I knew to ease off the power and angle myself upward in a gradual ascent. I emerged from the water and let myself float for a moment, satisfied at my progress.

Then I remembered where I was. Stupid water, ruining my enjoyment of swimming. I jetted sideways to where a short roof peeked out of the surface, then climbed up on it. There, I sat with my legs over the side—barely minding that they were in the water—to rest for a few minutes.

Regalia appeared before me a moment later.

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I leaped to my feet as her image coalesced from a rising figure of water. I immediately reached for my gun—which, of course, I didn't have on me anywhere. Not that it would do any good.

We'd known she might be watching—you always had to assume that, in Babilar. We could have gone outside her range to practice, but what would be the point? She knew about the spyril already, and we were confident she didn't want us dead. At least not immediately.

She stepped onto the rooftop, still connected to the sea by a tendril of liquid. She held a dainty cup of tea, and as she sat down a chair formed out of water behind her. Like before, she wore a professional suit and shirt, her white hair pinned up in a bun. Her dark African American skin was furrowed, creased with wrinkles.

"Oh, be still," Regalia said to me over her tea. "I'm not going to harm you. I just want to get a good look at you."

I hesitated. I could imagine this woman as a judge on television—distinguished, but harsh. Her voice had the air of a wise mother who was forced to intervene in the petty antics of immature children.

She was a preacher too, I remembered from my notes. *And didn't Obliteration quote scripture at me?* What was the connection there?

The Reckoner in me wanted to leap into the water and get away as quickly as possible. This was a very dangerous Epic. I'd never interacted this way with Steelheart; we'd stayed far away from him until the moment we sprang our trap.

But Regalia ruled the waters. If I leaped into them, I'd only be *more* in her power.

She doesn't want you dead, I told myself again. *See what you can learn*. It went against my instincts, but it seemed the best thing to do.

"How did Jonathan kill the Epic who had those powers?" Regalia asked, nodding toward my legs. "Normally an Epic has to be murdered in order for such devices to be created, you know. I have always wondered how the Reckoners managed it in the case of those jets."

I remained silent.

"You fight us," Regalia continued. "You claim to hate us. And yet you wear our skins upon your backs. What you really hate is that you cannot tame us, as man tamed the beasts. And so you murder us."

"You dare talk to me about *murder*?" I demanded. "After what you did by inviting Obliteration into this city?"

Regalia studied me with an expressionless face. She set her teacup aside and it melted, no longer part of her projection. Wherever she actually was, she was sitting in that chair, so I tried to remember how it looked. It was just a simple wooden seat, with no ornamentation on the sides or back, but maybe it could give us a clue as to where her base was.

"Has Jonathan told you what he is?" Regalia asked.

"A friend of yours," I said vaguely. "From years ago."

She smiled. "Yes. We were both made Epics at around the same time." She watched me. "No surprise at hearing he is an Epic? So you do know. I had assumed he was still maintaining the act."

"Do you know," I shot back, "that if an Epic stops using their powers, they revert to their old selves? You don't need us to kill you, Regalia. Just stop using your powers."

"Ah," she said, "if only it were so simple …" She shook her head as if amused by my innocence, then nodded toward the waters out in Central Park Bay. They rippled and moved, small waves forming on the surface and changing as quickly as the expressions on the face of a child trapped in quicksand made of candy.

"You took well to that device," Regalia said. "I watched the other man practice, and he required far longer to accustom himself to its power. You are a natural with the abilities, it seems."

"Regalia," I said, stepping forward. "Abigail. You don't have to

be like this. You—”

“Do not act as if you know me, young man,” Regalia said. Her tone was quiet but firm.

I stopped in place.

“You have killed Steelheart,” Regalia continued. “For that alone I should destroy you. We have so few pockets of civilization remaining to us, and you bring down one that has not only power but advanced medical care? Hubris of the most high, child. If you were in my court, I’d see you locked away for life. If you were in my congregation, I’d do even worse.”

“If you hadn’t noticed,” I replied, “Newcago is running just fine without Steelheart. Just like Babilar would run fine without you. Isn’t that why you’ve forced Prof to come here? Because you want him to kill you?”

She hesitated at that, and I realized I might have said too much. Did I just give away that Prof knew her plan? But if she really wanted him to stop her, she’d expect him to figure it out, right? I needed to be more careful. Regalia was not only an Epic; she was also an *attorney*. That was like putting curry powder in your hot sauce. She could talk rings around me.

But how could I get information from her without saying anything? I made a snap decision and jumped off the rooftop, engaging the spyril and jetting through the water of Central Park Bay. I burst from the water a few minutes later, landing on another roof far north of the one I’d been on before.

“You *do* realize how ridiculous you look doing that,” Regalia said, stretching up from the water, speaking even before her new shape fully formed.

I yelped, pretending to be alarmed. I left this building and splashed farther northward until I was at the very northern edge of the bay. Here, exhausted, I broke from the water again and settled onto a rooftop, water streaming from my brow.

“Are you quite done?” Regalia asked as her chair formed from the water just before me again. She picked up her cup of tea. “I can appear anywhere I want, silly boy. I’m surprised Jonathan didn’t explain this to you.”

Not anywhere, I thought. *You have a limited range.*

And she’d just given me two more data points that would help Tia pinpoint her true location. I slipped off the roof into the water, intending to take another swim and see if I could get her

to follow one more time.

"You *are* good with the device," Regalia noted. "Did you ever know Waterlog, the Epic in whom those powers originated? I created him, you know."

I stopped in the water beside the building, frozen like a beetle who'd just discovered that his mother had been eaten by a praying mantis.

Regalia sipped her tea.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Oh, so that interests you, does it? His original name was Georgi, a minor street thug down in Orlando. He showed promise. I made him into an Epic."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, laughing. Nobody could *make* Epics. Sure, once in a while new ones appeared. Though the vast majority had been here since about a year after Calamity's rise, I knew of a few notable Epics who had only recently manifested powers. But no one knew why or how.

"So certain in your denial," Regalia said, shaking her head. "Do you think you know so much about the world, David Charleston? You know how everything works?"

I stopped laughing, but I didn't believe her for a moment. She was playing me somehow. What was her game?

"Ask Obliteration next time you see him," Regalia said idly, "assuming you live long enough. Ask about what I've done to his powers, how much stronger they are, despite what I have taken from him."

I looked up at her, frowning. "Taken from him?" What did she mean by that? What would she "take" from an Epic? And that aside, was she also implying she'd *enhanced* Obliteration's powers? Was that the reason for the lack of cooldown on his teleporting?

"You can't fight me," she said. "If you do you'll end up dead, alone. Gasping for breath in one of these jungle buildings, one step from freedom. Your last sight a blank wall that someone had spilled coffee on. A pitiful, pathetic end. Think on that."

She vanished.

I climbed up onto the rooftop and wiped some water from my eyes, then sat down. That had been a decidedly surreal experience. As I rested I thought on what she'd told me. There was so much that it only grew more troubling the more I thought

it through.

Eventually I jumped back into the water and swam to the others.

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TWO days later I lingered in the library of our underwater base, alone, looking at Tia's map. The points where I'd seen Regalia were marked with red pins and little exclamation points scribbled right on the paper. I smiled, remembering Tia's excitement as she'd placed those pins. Though the math of what she was doing here wasn't particularly interesting to me, the end result certainly was.

I moved to walk away, then stopped myself. I'd done well enough in my mathematics training at the Factory, even if I hadn't enjoyed the subject. I couldn't afford to be lazy just because someone else had things in hand. I wanted to know for myself. I forced myself to turn back and try to figure out Tia's notations. From what I eventually worked out, my points had helped a lot, but we needed more data from the southeastern side of the city before we could really determine Regalia's center base.

Feeling satisfied, I left the library. With nothing to do.

Which was odd. Back in Newcago, I'd always had something to occupy my time, mostly because of Abraham and Cody. Whenever they'd seen me looking idle, they'd handed me a project. Cleaning guns, carrying crates, practicing with the tensors—something.

Here, that didn't happen. I couldn't practice with the spyril down here—and I could only go up above to practice during certain preplanned excursions. Besides, my body ached from the hours I'd already spent power-swimming around the city. Prof's forcefields kept me from getting battered, but they didn't protect my muscles from strain.

I peeked in on Tia—her door was cracked—and I knew from

her look of concentration and the six empty cola pouches by her seat that I shouldn't disturb her. Mizzy was in the workroom with Val helping her, fixing one of our boat motors. When I stepped in to talk to them, I got an immediate cold scowl from Val. I stopped dead in the doorway, chilled by that stare. Val seemed to be in an even worse mood than normal in the last few days.

Mizzy gave me a little shrug, wiggling her hand and making Val pass her a wrench. Sparks. I turned around and left them. Now what? I should be doing *something*. I sighed and headed back toward my room, where I could dig into my notes on Epics yet again. I passed Tia's room and was surprised when she called out.

"David?"

I hesitated by the door, then pushed it open farther. "Yeah?"

"How did you know?" Tia asked, head down over her datapad, typing something furiously. "About Sourcefield."

Sourcefield. The Epic we'd killed just before leaving Newcago. I stepped forward, eager. "You found something more? About her background?"

"I've just recovered the truth about her grandparents," Tia said with a nod. "They tried to kill her."

"That's sad, but …"

"They poisoned her drink."

"Kool-Aid?"

"A generic," Tia said, "but close enough. The grandparents were a strange pair, fascinated by cults and old stories. It was a copycat killing, or an attempted one, based on an older tragedy in South America. The important thing is that Sourcefield—rather, Emiline—was old enough at the time to realize that she'd been poisoned. She crawled out into the street when her throat and mouth started burning, and a passerby took her to the hospital. She became an Epic years later, and her weakness—"

"Was the very thing that had almost killed her," I finished, excited. "It's a connection, Tia."

"Maybe a coincidental one."

"You don't believe that," I said. How could she? This was another connection, a *real* one—like Mitosis, but even more promising. Was this where Epic weaknesses came from? Something that nearly killed them?

But how would bad rock music nearly kill a guy? I wondered. Touring, perhaps? An accident. We needed to know more.

“I think a coincidence *is* possible,” Tia said, then looked up and finally met my eyes. “But I also think it’s worth investigating. Nice work. How did you guess?”

“There’s got to be some logic to it, Tia,” I said. “The powers, the weaknesses, the Epics … who gets chosen.”

“I don’t know, David,” Tia said. “Does there really *have* to be a rationale behind it? In ancient days, when a disaster struck everyone would try to make sense of it—find a reason. Somebody’s sins. Angered gods. But nature doesn’t always have a reason for us, not the type we want.”

“You’re going to look into it, right?” I asked. “This is like Mitosis—similar at least. Maybe we can find a connection with Steelheart and his weakness. He could only be harmed by someone who didn’t fear him. Maybe in his past he was nearly killed by someone who—”

“I’ll look into it,” Tia said, stopping me. “I promise.”

“You seem reluctant,” I pressed. How could she be so skeptical? This was exciting! Revolutionary!

“I thought we were beyond this. The lorists spent the early years searching for a connection between Epic weaknesses. We decided there wasn’t one.” She hesitated. “Though I suppose that was a challenging time—when communication was difficult and the government was collapsing. We made other mistakes back then; I suppose I wouldn’t be surprised to discover we’d been too hasty in making some of our decisions.” She sighed. “I’ll look into this further, though Calamity knows I don’t have the time these days with the Regalia issue.”

“I can help,” I said, taking another step forward.

“I know you can. I’ll keep you informed of what I discover.”

I stayed where I was, stubborn not to leave so easily.

“That was a dismissal, David.”

“I—”

“The people I work with are very secretive,” Tia interrupted. “I’ve been implying to them that you should be allowed to join our ranks, but if you do you’ll have to give up on fieldwork. Having access to our knowledge necessitates preventing you from taking risks, lest you get captured and interrogated.”

I grunted, annoyed. I’d been looking forward to the chance, someday, to meet with Tia’s lorists. But I wasn’t going to give up on running point, not when there were Epics to kill. Being a lorist

sounded like a job for a nerd anyway.

I sighed and retreated from the library. This left me with the same problem as before, unfortunately. What to do with myself? Tia wouldn't let me in on the research, and Val didn't want me nearby.

Who would have thought that living in an awesome undersea base would be so boring?

I walked slowly back toward my room. The hallway was quiet except for some echoing sounds from farther down the dark stretch. Faint, with a rasping quality, they called to me like the ding on a microwave as it finished nuking a pizza pocket. I passed door after door until I eventually reached Exel's room. He had the door wide open, and the inside was plastered wall to wall with posters of interesting buildings. An architecture buff? I wouldn't have guessed—but then again, I was having trouble guessing anything about Exel.

The man himself sat filling up a large chair near a small table set with an antiquated piece of machinery. He nodded to me, then continued to fiddle with the machine in front of him. It made buzzing noises.

Feeling welcome for the first time all day, I walked in and settled into a seat beside him. "A radio?" I guessed as he turned a dial.

"Specifically, a scanner," he said.

"I have no idea what that means."

"It just lets me look for signals, mostly local ones, and see if I can hear them."

"How … old-fashioned," I said.

"Well, maybe not as much as you think," he answered. "This isn't *actually* the radio, just a control mechanism. We're buried far enough underwater that I wouldn't get good signals here; the real radio is stashed above."

"Still—radio?" I tapped my new mobile. "We have something better."

"And most people above do not," Exel said, sounding amused. "You think the people partying and lounging in this city have the resources to use *mobiles*? Knighthawk mobiles no less?"

I hesitated. Mobiles had been common in Newcago, where Steelheart had had a deal with the Knighthawk Foundry. While that sounded altruistic of him, there was a simpler truth to it.

With everyone carrying mobiles, he could force upon them "obedience programs" and other warnings to keep them in line.

Apparently Regalia didn't have something similar.

"Radios," Exel said, tapping his receiver. "Some things just *work*. There is elegance in simplicity. If I were up there living a relatively normal life, I'd want a radio instead of a mobile. I can fix a radio; I know how it works. Calamity only knows what goes on inside one of those modern devices."

"But how do the radios get power?" I asked.

Exel shook his head. "Radios just work here in Babilar."

"You mean …"

"No explanation for it," he said with a shrug of his ample shoulders. "Nothing else works without a power source—blenders, clocks, whatever you try. Won't work. But radios turn on, even if you don't have batteries in them."

That gave me a shiver. Even more than the strange lights in the darkness, this creeped me out. Ghostly powered radios? What was *happening* in this city?

Exel didn't seem bothered. He tuned to another frequency, then took out his pen, leaning in, writing. I scooted my chair closer. From what I could tell, he was just listening to random chatter of townspeople. He made a few notes, then moved on. He listened to this frequency for a while without making notes before going to the next one, where he scribbled things down furiously.

He really seemed to know what he was doing. His notes were neat and efficient, and he seemed to be searching to see if some of the people might be speaking in code. I took one of his sheets off the table; he glanced at me but didn't stop me.

It looked like he was also scanning for mentions of Regalia and stories regarding her direct appearance. Most of what he had was hearsay, but I was impressed with the detail of the notes, and with the conclusions he was drawing. Some of the notes indicated the frequency had been muffled, or static-filled, but he'd managed to re-create entire conversations—the words he actually heard underlined, the rest filled in.

I looked up from the sheet. "You're a mortician," I said, skeptical.

"Third generation," he said proudly. "Was there for my own grandfather's embalming. Stuffed the eyes with cotton myself."

"They teach this in mortician school?" I said, holding up the

paper.

"Nope," Exel said with a grin. "Learned that in the CIA."

"You're a *spook*?" I asked, shocked.

"Hey, even the CIA needed morticians."

"Uh, no. I don't think it did."

"More than you think," Exel said, tuning to another frequency. "Back in the old days there were hundreds like me. Not all morticians, of course—but similar. People living normal lives, doing regular jobs, placed in areas where we could do a little good here and there. I spent years teaching mortuary science in Seoul, listening to the radios at night with my team. Everyone imagines spies to be the 'cocktails and bow tie' sort, but there weren't actually many of those. Most of us were regular folks."

"You," I said. "Regular?"

"Within plausible limits of believability," Exel said.

I found myself smiling. "I don't get you, Exel," I said, picking up another sheet from his stack. "The other day you almost seemed to sympathize with the do-nothings who flock to this city."

"I do sympathize with them," Exel said. "I'd love to do nothing. Seems like a grand profession. It's never because of the 'do-nothings' that people go to war."

"Says the former spy."

"Former?" Exel asked, waggling a pencil at me.

"Exel, if nobody changes the world, if nobody works to make it better, then we stagnate."

"I could live with stagnation," Exel said, "if it meant no war. No killing."

I wasn't certain I agreed. Maybe I was naive, as I'd never lived through any human-on-human wars—my life had been dominated by the conflict with the Epics. But I figured the world would be pretty boring if all you did was stay the same.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Exel continued. "That can't be. My job now is about doing what I can to make sure people get to live their lives how they want to. If that means basking in the sun and not worrying, then good for them. At least someone in this sorry world is enjoying themselves."

He continued writing. I could have argued further, but I found my heart wasn't in it. If this was what motivated him to fight the Epics, then so be it. We each had our reasons.

Instead I let my attention be drawn by a page of notes relating to a specific topic: Dawnslight, the mythical Epic who supposedly made the plants grow and the spraypaint shine. Exel's page was filled with references to people discussing him, praying to him, cursing by his name.

I could see why people were so interested in Dawnslight. Babilar could not exist without him, whoever he was. But reports placed him in the city long before Regalia had arrived. Dared I hope it was true, that an Epic existed who was this benevolent? An Epic who didn't kill, or didn't even dominate, but who instead made food grow and light appear? Who was this person who created paradise in the buildings of old Manhattan?

"Exel," I said, looking up from the paper, "you've lived here for a while."

"Ever since Prof ordered us to embed," the large man replied.

"Do you think Dawnslight is a real person?"

He tapped his pencil on his pad for a moment, then set it down and reached beside his seat for a pouch of orange soda. You could get it shipped out of Charlotte, like the cola, if you had connections. There was an Epic there who really loved soda and paid to have the machinery maintained.

"You've seen my notes," Exel said, nodding to the sheet I was looking at. "That page is one of many. I've been keeping an ear out for mentions of Dawnslight since I arrived. He's real. Too many people talk about him for him to not be."

"A lot of people talk about God," I said. "Or they used to."

"Because he's real too. You don't believe, I assume?"

I wasn't certain. I fished under my shirt, bringing out Abraham's gift. The stylized *S* shape that was the symbol of the Faithful. What did I believe? For years my "religion" had been Steelheart's death. I'd worshipped that goal as fervently as any old-time monk in a monkplace.

"Well, I've never been the missionary type," Exel said, "and I think that God might be a topic for another day. But as for Dawnslight, I'm reasonably certain he's real."

"The people here *worship* him as a god."

"Well, they may be a screwy bunch," Exel said, raising his pouch. "But they're a peaceful lot, right? So good for them."

"And their Epic? Is Dawnslight peaceful?"

"Seems so."

I was dancing around it. I needed to just say what I meant. I leaned forward. “Exel, do you think it’s *possible* for Epics to be good?”

“Of course they can be. We all have free will. It’s a divine right.”

I sat back, thoughtful.

“You don’t agree, I see.”

“Actually I do,” I said. I *had* to believe Epics could be good—for Megan’s sake. “I want to find a way to bring some Epics to our side, but Prof thinks I’m a fool.” I ran my hand through my hair. “Half the time, I think he’s right.”

“Well, Jonathan Phaedrus is a great man. A wise man. But I once saw him lose to a bluff in poker, so we have empirical evidence that he doesn’t know *everything*.”

I smiled.

“I think your goal is a worthy one, Steelslayer.” Exel sat up straighter and looked me in the eye. “I don’t think we can ever beat the Epics on our own. We’d need a lot more firepower. Perhaps all the world needs is for a few Epics to step up and openly oppose the others. Nothing so dramatic as the Faithful believe, no mystical coming of blessed, angelic Epics. Just one or two who are willing to say, ‘Hey, this isn’t right.’ If everyone including the Epics knew that there was another option, perhaps it would change everything.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“Thanks for what? For blabbing my random opinions at you?”

“Pretty much. I needed someone to talk to. Tia was too busy, and Val seems to hate me.”

“Nah, you just remind her of Sam. The spyril was his baby, you know.”

Well, I guess that made a kind of sense then. Unfair though it was.

“I—”

“Wait a sec,” Exel said, holding up a hand. “Listen.”

I turned my attention to the radio, focusing on making out the words. The static had been constant as we were talking, but I hadn’t realized there were faint voices in the background.

“… yeah, I see him,” a voice said. “He’s just sitting there, on the rooftop in Turtle Bay.”

“Is he doing anything?” another voice said, the frequency

crackling with static.

"Nah." First voice. "His eyes are closed. His face is turned toward the sky."

"Get out of there, Miles." Second voice. Frightened. "He's dangerous. Murdered a lot of people a couple weeks back."

"Yeah." First voice. "Why's he just sitting there, though?"

Exel looked up and met my eyes. "Obliteration?" he asked.

I nodded, feeling sick.

"You guessed he'd be doing this," Exel said. "Nice call."

"I wish I hadn't been right," I said, throwing back my chair and standing. "I need to go find Prof."

Obliteration had started storing up sunlight, like he had in Houston, Albuquerque, and finally San Diego.

If I was right, the city wouldn't survive his next step.

27

I found Prof in the conference room, the room with the large wall/window looking out into the ocean. The waters were clearer today than they'd been the last time I'd been in there, and I could see distant shadows, dark and square. They were buildings—a phantom skyline under the sea.

Prof stood in his black lab coat, staring out into the depths, hands clasped behind him.

"Prof?" I asked, hurrying into the room. "Exel just intercepted a conversation. Someone spotted Obliteration. He's storing energy."

Prof continued to stare into the depths.

"Like in Houston?" I prompted. "The days before he destroyed the entire place? Sir?"

Prof nodded toward the sunken city. "You never visited this place before it sank, did you?"

"No," I answered, trying to ignore the awful window he stared out of.

"I came into the city regularly. To see plays, go shopping, sometimes to just walk. It seemed that the most humble diners in Manhattan served better food than the nicest restaurants back home. And the finest places … Ah, I remember the way it smelled.…"

"Um, yeah. Obliteration?"

He nodded curtly and turned from the window. "Let's go have a look, then."

"Have a look?"

"You and me," Prof said, striding away. "We're point men. If there's danger, we check it out."

I ran after him. I wasn't going to argue—any excuse to get out

of the base was a good one—but this didn't seem like Prof. He liked to plan. In Newcago we'd rarely moved, even on a scouting mission, without careful deliberation.

We entered the hallway and passed the room where Mizzy and Val were working. "I'm taking the sub," Prof announced to them without even a glance. I hurried to keep up, glancing back and shrugging toward a confused Mizzy, who had poked her head out after us.

I picked up my pace and ran ahead of Prof, fetching my gun from the equipment closet. I hesitated, then grabbed the backpack with the spyril inside as well.

"You shouldn't need that," Prof noted, passing me.

"So you think I should leave it?"

"Of course not."

I slung the pack over my shoulder, then joined Prof as he entered the darkness of the docking room. Here we followed a set of rope guides toward the sub. *Why*, I thought, *do I feel like a dog who just swallowed a hand grenade?* There was nothing to be nervous about; this was Prof. The great Jon Phaedrus. We were going on a scouting mission together. I should be excited.

Prof popped the hatch on the sub and we climbed in. Once we were down below, I locked the hatch, and Prof turned on a pale yellow emergency light. He waved me forward to sit in the copilot seat and started up the machine. A few moments later we were moving through the silent depths, and I had to stare out yet *another* window—the front of the sub—at more water.

"So … do you need to know where we're going?" I finally asked.

"Yes." His face was lit eerily by the yellow light.

"Well, we heard them say the words Turtle Bay."

Prof turned the sub in a slow curve. "Missouri tells me you're getting good with the spyril."

"Yeah. Well, I mean, I'm practicing. I don't know that I'd say I'm *good*, but I might get there eventually."

My mobile beeped quietly. I winced, then pulled it out. This new one had a different silencing button, and I always forgot to tap it. It used my old pattern, so anyone who knew that could contact me, but the message on the screen was from a pattern I didn't recognize.

Okay, let's talk, it read.

“That’s good,” Prof said. “The tensors won’t be of much use to you here.”

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to work out who was messaging. “When we were fighting inside the office building, it might have been good to slip through a wall unexpectedly.”

“The spyril will be more useful,” Prof said. “Focus on that for now. We don’t want to mix the powers. Might cause interference.”

Interference? What kind of interference? I’d never heard of such a thing. Granted, I didn’t know much about this technology, but if such interference were a problem, wouldn’t it have affected the forcefields Prof gave me?

My mobile buzzed again. I’d silenced it but hadn’t turned off the vibrations. *You there, Knees?* the message read.

My heart jumped.

Megan? I typed back.

Who else would it be, you slontze?

Prof glanced at me. “What’s happening?”

“Exel’s messaging me,” I lied. “With more information on how to find Obliteration.”

Prof nodded, turning eyes forward again. I quickly sent a message to Exel, asking if he had more information on Obliteration’s location, just in case Prof asked him later on. My mobile lit up almost immediately, saying someone else had seen Obliteration. Directions to the building followed.

In the middle of that, Megan messaged again.

I really need to talk to you about something.

This isn’t exactly a good time, I sent back.

Great. Fine.

The terseness of that reply made me sick inside. I was turning her away after practically begging her to talk to me earlier? I glanced at Prof. He seemed absorbed by his driving, and the sub didn’t move quickly. I probably had plenty of time. How suspicious would it be?

Well, maybe I can spare some time to chat. I pressed SEND.

No reply.

Sparks. Why did everything have to happen at once? I waited for a response, submarine engines churning, sweat trickling down the sides of my face. Sitting up front here, you could see the whole underwater world stretching out before you, seemingly

into infinity itself. Thinking about all this *nothing* made my hair stand on end.

I bent down over my mobile and sent another message to Megan. *Do you know why Regalia claimed she can make Epics?*

This time I got a response almost immediately. *She said what?*

She told me she'd made someone into an Epic, I wrote back. *She seemed to think it would scare me. I think she wanted me to decide that we can't fight back because she can send an unending string of Epics at us.*

What did you tell her? Megan asked.

Can't remember exactly. I think I laughed at her.

You never were very bright, Knees. That woman is dangerous.

But she literally had us in her grasp at one point! I wrote back. *She let us go. I don't think she wants us dead. Anyway, why do you think she would claim something that ridiculous? Did she really think I'd believe she could* make *someone into an Epic?*

Megan didn't respond for a time.

We really need to meet, she finally wrote to me. *Where are you?*

Heading into the city, I said.

Perfect.

Prof is with me, I added.

Oh.

You could meet with both of us, I wrote to her. *Explain yourself. He'd listen.*

It's more complicated than that, Megan wrote. *I was a spy for Steelheart, and I infiltrated Prof's own team. When it comes to his precious Reckoners, Phaedrus is like a mother bear with her cubs.*

Huh? I wrote back. *No, that's wrong.*

What?

I don't think that metaphor works, Megan. Prof is a dude, so he can't be a mother bear.

David, you are a complete and utter slontze.

I could hear the smile in her tone. Sparks, I missed her.

I'm an adorable one though, right? I wrote to her.

A pause, during which I found myself sweating.

I wish it was so easy, her message finally came. *I really, really wish it.*

It can be, I wrote back. *You still willing to meet?*

And Phaedrus?

I'll find a way to lose him, I wrote as Prof began to take the sub

to the surface. *Will message you later*. I then tucked the mobile into my pocket.

"We there?" I asked.

"Almost," Prof replied.

"You've been pretty quiet this trip."

"I've been trying to decide if I should send you back to Newcago or not."

The words hit me like a slug from a .44 Special. I blinked, searching for a response. "But … you said when we came here, you said you were bringing me because you needed me."

"Son," Prof said softly, "if you think I can't kill Epics without you, then you must have a low opinion of my skills. If I decide you shouldn't be part of this operation, then you'll be out. Period."

"But why would you decide that?"

Prof piloted in silence for a moment, steering the sub slowly around a large chunk of floating debris—it looked like a hot dog stand. "You're a good point man, David," Prof said. "You think quickly and you solve problems. You have excellent instincts under fire. You're bold and aggressive."

"Thank you?"

"And you're exactly the sort of person I've avoided recruiting over the years."

I frowned.

"You haven't noticed?" Prof asked.

Now that he mentioned it … I thought about Cody, and Exel, and Abraham, and Mizzy. Even Val, to an extent. They weren't gun-toting, shoot-'em-up types. They were reserved, careful, slow to act.

"I've noticed," I said. "But I didn't really put it together until now."

"The Reckoners are not an army," Prof said. "We're not even a special forces unit. We're trap-layers. We're patient and conservative. You're none of those things. You're a firecracker, always urging us to action, to change the plan. This is good, in a way. You think big, son. It takes people with big dreams to accomplish big goals."

He turned to me, the sub puttering along slowly, not needing his guidance. "But I can't help thinking," he said, "that you don't intend to stick to the plan. You want to protect Regalia, and you

harbor sympathies for a traitor. You have aspirations. So you're going to tell me, right now, the things you've been hiding from me. And then we're going to decide what to do with you."

"Now?" I asked.

"Now." Prof met my eyes. "Out with it."

28

PROF held my gaze, making me sweat. Sparks, that man could be intense. He wanted to pretend that his was a quiet, careful group—and in truth, it mostly was. If you didn't count him. He was like me. He always had been.

And because of that, I knew how deadly serious he was.

I licked my lips. "I'm planning to capture one of Regalia's Epics," I said. "When we hit Newton, I want to try to neutralize her instead of killing her—then I want to capture her. Like we did with Edmund back in Newcago."

Prof regarded me for a moment, then seemed to relax, as if that wasn't nearly as bad as he'd feared. "What would be the point?"

"Well, we know Regalia is devious. She's planning something more than we've been able to figure out."

"Possibly."

"*Probably*. You've said she's wily. You've implied she's very careful, and very clever. Sparks, Prof, you have to be worried that she's playing us all, even now."

He turned away from me. "I will admit that it has crossed my mind. Abigail has a habit of … positioning people, myself included, in places where she wants them."

"Well, she knows you. She knows what you'll do." I grew more excited—it seemed that I might have dug myself out of a bad situation. "She won't expect you to try a kidnapping, then. It's too bold, and not at all in line with the Reckoner methodology. But think what it could accomplish! Newton might know what Regalia is up to—at the very least, she'll know how Regalia is recruiting these other Epics."

"I doubt we'd learn much," Prof said. "Abigail wouldn't share

that kind of information."

"Well, at the very least, Newton could tell us places that Regalia has appeared to her," I said. "Which will help with our map. And there's the chance she knows more. Right?"

Prof tapped the submarine's steering stick, the bubble-like window before him glowing with filtered light from above. "And how would you plan to make her talk? Torture?"

"Well, actually, I was kind of hoping that by keeping her from using her powers … you know … we'd make her turn good or something."

He cocked an eyebrow at me.

"It happened with Edmund," I said defensively.

"Edmund wasn't a murderer before his transformation."

Well, that was true.

"Beyond that," Prof said, "Edmund is good because he gifts his powers—like I do. He didn't 'turn good.' He just never went evil in the first place. What you really meant, but didn't want to say it for fear of angering me, is that *Firefight* seemed to be good when she was with us. You're hoping that by preventing Newton from using her powers, you can get proof that doing the same for Firefight will return Megan to you."

"Maybe," I said, shrinking down in my chair.

"This is just the sort of thing I worried you were considering," Prof said. "You could have endangered the entire team by pursuing your own goals, David. Can't you see that?"

"I suppose," I said.

"Is that everything?" Prof asked me. "No other hidden plots?"

I grew cold. Megan. "That's everything," I found myself saying.

"Well, I suppose it isn't too bad." Prof let out a breath.

"So I'm staying in Babilar?"

"For now," Prof said. "Calamity. You're either exactly what the Reckoners need, and have needed for years … or you're a representation of the reckless heroism we've been wise to avoid. I still can't decide."

He steered the sub right toward a submerged building with a gaping hole in its side. It looked a lot like the place where we docked, but it was a different building. We passed into the opening like a big piece of buttered popcorn passing into the mouth of some decomposing beast. Inside, Prof popped the lever that released a flood of dish soap into the water, to make the

surface tension weaker and inhibit Regalia's powers. He turned off the lights and let us surface.

We felt our way out and found the ropes to lead us across treacherous, half-submerged flooring to a set of steps. I couldn't see much of anything, though that was the point.

"Head up those steps," Prof whispered over the line. "We scouted this building to use as a potential base before we found the other one. This place is unused, far enough from the neighborhoods that no bridges lead to it. The upstairs is a private office suite, which should have a good view of the rooftop in question."

"Got it," I said—holding my rifle in one hand, backpack over my other shoulder—as I felt at the door.

"I'm going to get back in the sub to be ready to pull out in a hurry," Prof said. "Something about all this feels off to me. Be ready to run; I'll leave the top open for you." He paused, and I felt his hand grip my shoulder. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Don't worry," I whispered over the line, "I'm an expert on stupid."

"You're …"

"Like, I can spot stupidity, because I know it so well. The way an exterminator knows bugs really well, and can spot where they've been? I'm like that. A stupidinator."

"Never say that word again," Prof said.

Well, it made sense to me. He let go, and I pulled open the door and stepped inside. After pulling it closed, I strapped my mobile to my shoulder and turned on the light. The stairwell led upward in a dark incline, wet, partially rotting. Like the forgotten steps you might find in some old horror movie.

Except people in those movies hadn't been armed with a fully automatic Gottschalk assault rifle with electron-compressed magazines and a night-vision scope. I smiled, dimming my mobile and raising the rifle, engaging the night vision. Prof said this place was abandoned, but it was best to be certain.

I climbed the steps carefully, rifle at my shoulder. I still wasn't completely satisfied with the Gottschalk. My old rifle had been better. Sure, it had jammed now and then. And it hadn't been automatic, and had needed the sights adjusted at least once a month. And … well, it had just been better anyway. So there.

Megan would laugh at that, I thought. Getting sentimental about

a clearly inferior gun? Only fools did that. The thing was, we talk that way—but we all seem to get sentimental about our guns anyway. I reached to my side, suddenly realizing that it felt wrong not to have Megan's handgun on me any longer. I'd need to requisition a replacement.

At the top of the long stairwell, I entered what had once been a well-furnished reception room. Now overgrown with the ubiquitous Babilar plant life, it was draped in gloom and vines. No windows gave light to this room, and though fruit drooped from the trees and covered the floor, none of it glowed. That only happened after nightfall.

I inched forward, stepping over old expense reports and other paperwork. The room smelled terrible—of rot and fungus. I found myself oddly annoyed at Prof as I walked. What did he mean by "reckless heroism"? Weren't we supposed to be heroes?

My father had waited for the heroes. He'd believed in them. He'd died because he'd believed in Steelheart.

He'd been a fool in that regard. But somehow, more and more, I found myself wishing I could be the same kind of fool. I wasn't going to feel guilty for trying to help people. Prof could say what he wanted, but deep down he felt the same way. He'd agreed to bring down Steelheart because he'd sensed that the Reckoners weren't making enough of a difference.

He would make the right decisions. He'd save this city. Prof *was* a hero. The Epic who fought for mankind. He just needed to admit it. And—

Something under my foot crunched.

I froze and scanned the small room through my scope again. Nothing. I lowered the gun and turned on my light. What in Calamity's shadow …?

I'd stepped on a cluster of small objects that were growing from vines at the bottom of one of the trees. The bizarre plant tendrils grew out from under the bark like whiskers on a man wearing a mask. I had to take a closer look at what I was seeing because I could swear that at their tips were … cookies.

Yes, cookies. I knelt down, fishing among them for a moment. I pulled out a piece of paper. *Fortune cookies*, I thought. *Growing from the tree*.

I flipped the paper over, reading the words.

Help me.

Great. I was back in the horror movie.

Unsettled, I stepped back and snapped my rifle up into position. I looked around the room again, shining my mobile into shadowed corners behind tree trunks. Nothing jumped out at me. When I was convinced I was alone, I bent down to the cookies again and searched among them, reading other slips of paper. They all said either *Help me* or *She has me captive*.

"David?" Tia's voice sounded in my earpiece. "You into position yet?"

I jumped almost to the ceiling.

"Uh, not yet," I said, stuffing some of the pieces of paper and the bits of cookie into my pocket. "I just stumbled onto something. Um … has anyone ever reported finding cookies growing from the fruit trees?"

Silence on the line.

"Cookies?" Tia asked. "David, is something wrong with you?"

"Well, I've kind of had some indigestion lately," I noted, moving toward the room's other door, behind a decomposing receptionist's desk. "But I don't think that's causing me to hallucinate cookies. Usually indigestion *strictly* causes cheesecake delusions."

"Ha, ha," Tia said dryly.

"Take a sample," Prof said. "Move on."

"Done and done," I said, listening at the door, then shoving it open and checking each corner of the room on the other side. It was empty, though a pair of broad windows shone light in on me. It was an executive office strewn with fallen books and metallic doodads, like those little ball things where you raise one side, then it clicks annoyingly against the others. Only two trees were growing in here, one on either side of the room, sending vines creeping up the bookcases on each wall.

I continued forward, stepping over the debris and doing my best to stay low, approaching the large windows. This building *was* secluded, off by itself in the middle of the ocean. Waves broke against the base, water churning below. Distantly across some kind of bay, other buildings broke the surface of the ocean. Babilar proper.

I knelt down, set aside my backpack, and poked the front of my gun out a broken section of window. Eye to the scope, I dialed up to ten times magnification. It worked beautifully. I could see five

hundred yards easily; in fact, dialing up the zoom, I bet I could get to two thousand yards with reasonable detail.

Sparks. I'd never made shots like *that* before. I was good with a rifle, but I wasn't a trained sniper. I doubted the Gottschalk had the range for that shot anyway, though the scope was excellent for peeking about.

"I'm in position," I said. "Which building is it?"

"You see a peaked one?" Exel said over the line. "Next to the two flatter rooftops?"

"Yup," I said, zooming in. It was quite a distance, but no problem for the gun's excellent magnification.

And there he was.

29

OBLITERATION looked much as he had the other two times I'd seen him, except he'd removed his shirt, black trench coat, and glasses, which were now strewn on the rooftop beside his sword. His bandaged chest was exposed, and he sat cross-legged, goateed face stretched toward the sky, eyes closed. His posture was serene, like a man doing morning yoga.

The major difference between now and when I'd seen him before, however, was that he glowed with a deep inner light, like something was burning just beneath his skin.

I felt a surprising surge of anger. I remembered thrashing in the water, the shackle around my leg pulling me toward the depths. Never again.

I focused on Obliteration, holosights putting a dot right on his head. Then I tapped the side of my gun, flipping a switch and sending a feed from the scope to my mobile. That sent the image to Tia.

"Thanks," Tia said, watching the feed. "Hmm … Doesn't look good. You thinking what I am?"

"Yeah," I said. "Can you dig out my photos of Houston?"

"I've got better ones," Tia said. "Asked around once I knew he was here. Sending."

I looked away from the scope and took the mobile off my arm. Tia's message arrived soon after, including a set of photos taken in Houston. This was from the height of Obliteration's reign in the city. It had been a terrible place to live, but—like Newcago—there'd been a certain level of stability. As I'd had proven to me in both Newcago and Babilar, people would rather live with the Epics—and their tyranny—than waste away in the chaos between

cities.

This meant there had been a lot of witnesses when Obliteration had settled down right before his palace, an old government building he'd repurposed, and started glowing. Most of those witnesses had died soon after. Some had gotten out, though, and more had sent photos from their mobiles to friends outside the city.

Tia's images—which were indeed better than the ones in my files—showed Obliteration sitting as he did now. Different pants, no bandage on his chest, and less scruff on his face, but same posture and glow.

"Those look like the pictures from the first day of him storing power in the other cities, wouldn't you say?" Tia said over the line.

"Yeah," I replied, moving through the images to look at another sequence of shots. Obliteration in San Diego. Same posture. I compared how much he glowed on the first day in both Houston and San Diego, then compared it to how he looked now. "I agree. He's only just begun the process."

"Would one of you two mind explaining to the old man what we're talking about?" Prof asked over the line.

"His primary ability—his heat manipulation—is exodynamic," I said.

"Great," Prof said. "Very helpful."

"I thought you were a genius," I said.

"I taught fifth-grade science," Prof reminded me. "And it's not like we taught Epic power theory back then."

"Obliteration," Tia said in a calm voice, "needs to draw heat out of objects to use for destroying things. Sunlight touching his skin works too—not as efficiently, but since it's persistent, it's an easy source for him."

"Before he destroyed Houston and each of the other cities he's annihilated, he sat in the sunlight for seven days drawing energy," I said. "He then released it in one burst. Comparing how much he's glowing now to the pictures from Houston, we can guess how long he's been doing this."

"And theoretically," Tia added, "we can guess how long we have until something very, very bad happens."

"We're going to have to move up our timetable," Prof said softly. "How soon can we prepare the hit on Newton?"

That was still the plan: attack Newton, draw Regalia out, and use this information to pinpoint Regalia's base. The firm way Prof spoke over the line seemed like he was talking directly to me. The Reckoners were going to kill Newton, not kidnap her—and my plan to do otherwise was foolish.

I didn't reply. It probably *was* foolish to try to kidnap her. For now, I'd go along with the plan as it stood.

"A hit on Newton will be tough," Tia said, "considering that we don't know her weakness."

"She repels attacks on her," Prof said. "So what if we just drown her? Force redirection won't save her if she's sinking into the ocean."

I shivered in horror at the thought.

"That could do it," Tia said. "I'll work on a plan."

"Even if our hit on Newton doesn't actually kill her," Prof said, "we will probably be all right. The point of the attack will be to lure out Regalia, pinpoint her base, then take *her* out. If Newton lives on, so be it."

"And Obliteration?" I asked, finger itching on the trigger of my rifle. I removed my hand. Not only was this a shot I couldn't make with any amount of reliability, but Obliteration's danger sense would engage and he'd teleport away. Better he be somewhere we could keep an eye on him. If we started annoying him without a proper plan in place, he might just set up somewhere hidden and store energy.

"Him we can't leave running around free," Prof agreed, speaking softly. "David's right. We'll need another plan for dealing with him. Soon."

I turned the scope of my rifle to scan the area around Obliteration. It was densely populated, as evidenced by the bridges in good repair and the tents with laundry hanging outside. Most people had wisely fled at the sight of Obliteration, but I could see a few who'd stayed, hidden near the edges of buildings or peeking out of nearby windows.

Even after what this creature had done, curiosity got the better of people. Inspecting windows, I gathered that the majority of the people had fled down into the rooms below, hiding among the trees and vines.

"We're going to need his weakness, Tia," Prof said over the line. "We can't rely on exploiting quirks in his powers."

“I know,” she replied. “It’s just that ordinary research doesn’t work for Obliteration. Most Epics spend time around people and their peers. Secrets leak out. But he is so solitary; he tends to kill even other Epics who get too close to him.”

Do not sorrow for this end of days, little one. I remembered the words Obliteration had spoken to me. Most Epics, in their megalomania, presumed some kind of dominance over the world. That Obliteration should quote religious texts and act like some divine agent wasn’t surprising.

It didn’t make the words any less creepy though.

As I scanned the rooftops nearby, I spotted someone standing on one of them, inspecting Obliteration through binoculars. I increased my zoom one level. Didn’t I know that face? I brought up my mobile and searched through it for the pictures of Newton’s gang members. Yes, this man was one of them, a thug named Knoxx. Not an Epic.

“I see one of Newton’s gang,” I said, looking back through the scope. “Focused on him now.”

“Hmm,” Tia said. “This is a deviation from their daily rounds, but it isn’t surprising, considering what Obliteration is doing.”

I nodded, watching as the man lowered his binoculars and spoke into his mobile.

“Yes,” Prof said, “probably just …”

Suddenly the man melted.

I caught my breath, losing the rest of what Prof was saying as I watched the man shift into the shape of a small pigeon. It took to the air and flew across the rooftop faster than I could track with my scope. I searched and finally located the animal landing on a different roof nearby, where he re-formed into a man.

“He’s an Epic,” I whispered. “Shapeshifter. Val’s notes say his name is Knoxx, but she said he didn’t have any powers. Do you recognize him, Tia?”

“I’ll have to search the records and see if any of the lorists mention him,” she said. “Newton’s gang often recruits lesser Epics; maybe Val’s team simply missed noticing this guy had abilities. Is Newton herself there?”

“I don’t …,” I said, trailing off as something landed beside Knoxx. “Wait. That’s her. She just … Sparks! She *jumped* from the next building over. That has to be fifty feet easy.”

The two started conversing, and what I wouldn’t have given to

be able to hear what they were saying. Finally, Newton pointed one direction, then the other. Were they setting up a perimeter? I watched as the man formed into a bird again and flew off.

Then Newton was gone. Sparks! That woman could *move*. I had to zoom back two steps to find her running across the rooftop. Her speed was impressive; by the display above my scope's holosights, she was moving at fifty-three miles per hour. I'd read of Epics who could move faster than that, but this was only one of her secondary powers.

Newton bounded up in a short hop and came down on the edge of a roof, then engaged her energy reflection power—she reflected the force of hitting the rooftop back downward, making her move like she was on a trampoline that perfectly conserved her energy. She shot into the air in a powerful, quick-moving arc and easily cleared the gap between buildings.

"Wow," Tia said softly.

"Not as impressive as flying," Prof grumbled.

"No, it's more impressive in some ways," Tia said. "Think of the precision and mastery that requires…."

I nodded in agreement, though they couldn't see. I followed Newton, moving my scope, as she leaped again. She landed on the roof of a large building right next to the one where Obliteration was, then pulled out her sword and started hacking away ropes on the bridge leading to another rooftop. She repeated this with the other two bridges on the building where she stood.

"This is unusual behavior for her," Tia said, sounding uncomfortable.

My hand tightened on the rifle barrel. She'd completely isolated a building right next to the one Obliteration was on. Now the water surrounding the building was pulling *away*, like … like people at a party leaving space around someone with bad gas. The water rushed back some ten feet on all sides, then held there, exposing the bottom half of the building. It was rusted over and encrusted with barnacles.

I glanced at Obliteration, sitting and glowing on the rooftop of the building next to the one the water had pulled away from. He hadn't moved, hadn't even reacted.

"What in Calamity's shadow?" Tia whispered. "That water is Regalia's doing, but why …?"

I looked back at the isolated building where Newton strolled over to the stairwell leading down from the roof into the building proper. She took something off her belt and tossed it down the stairs, then threw two more small objects onto the rooftop nearby. Finally, she bounded away.

“Firebombs,” I whispered as they exploded in quick succession. “She’s burning the building down. With the people inside.”

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I threw down the gun, scrambled back from the window, and leaped for the backpack. I unzipped it and pulled out the spyril.

"David?" Tia asked urgently. "Leave the scope on the building!"

"So you can watch those people die?" I asked, unpacking the wetsuit. Sparks! I didn't have time for that. I started affixing the spyril over my clothing, pulling off my shoes and doing the legs first.

"I need to observe Newton's behavior," Tia said, ever the academic. We were alike in some ways, but this was what separated us—I couldn't detach myself and just watch. "Newton hasn't killed in years," she continued, "save for a few quiet executions of rivals or those who threatened Regalia's peace. Why do something this atrocious now?"

"Regalia is making an example of those people," Prof said softly over the line. "She's using her power in an obvious way, to make it clear that this is her will—and to keep the people in the building from jumping into the water. This is meant to tell everyone to stay away from Obliteration. Like a corpse hung from the walls of a medieval city."

"Makes sense," Tia said. "He's going to have to sit out there for several days, immobile, and Regalia won't want him interrupted."

"We're witnessing her slide from benevolent but harsh dictator into all-destroying tyrant," Prof said quietly.

"I'm not going to 'witness' it," I said, pulling another strap tight. "I'm going to stop it."

"David—" Prof said over the line.

"Yeah, yeah," I spat. "Reckless heroism. I'm not going to just sit

here."

"But *why*," Tia said, voice softer. "Why is Regalia doing this? She could swallow the city in water, couldn't she? Why use Obliteration. Sparks … Why destroy the city at all? This isn't like Abigail."

"The Abigail we knew is dead," Prof said. "Only Regalia remains. David, if you save those people, she will only kill others. She will make certain her point gets made."

"*I don't care*," I said, trying to get the thin backplate of the spyril into place. This was a lot harder without Exel or Mizzy to help. "If we stop helping people because we're afraid, or ambivalent or whatever, then we lose. Let them do evil. I'll stop them."

"You're not omnipotent, David," Prof said. "You're just human."

I faltered for a moment, holding the pieces of the spyril. The powers of a dead Epic. Then I redoubled my efforts, pulling on the gloves, locking the wires in place from hands and legs up to the backplate. I stood up and engaged the streambeam—the laserlike line that would draw water once pointed at it. I looked back out through the window. The blaze had fully started, black smoke billowing up into the air.

I'd forgotten how wide the bay was separating me from the burning building. The scope made things look close, but I had a lot of water to cross before reaching the burning building.

Well, I'd just have to work more quickly. I placed my earpiece and mobile into the waterproof pocket of my pants. Then I took a deep breath and jumped out the window.

Pointing the streambeam downward, I started the water jets on my legs enough to slow my impact and splashed down into the ocean water. The shock of the cold and the taste of the briny salt was immediate. Sparks! It was way colder than it had been during practice.

Fortunately, I had the spyril. I pointed myself toward the smoking building and jetted away. This time, unfortunately, I didn't have one of Prof's forcefields, and each time I came crashing down into the ocean porpoiselike, water hit my face like the slap of a jilted lover.

I dealt with it. Gasping for breath each time I emerged from the ocean. Sparks! The waves were a lot stronger out here than they

had been in the Central Park sea, and it was tough to see when surrounded by them.

I slowed the jets to get my bearings and had a moment of severe disorientation. I was in the middle of *nothing*. With the waves surging, I couldn't see the city at all, and it seemed like I was in a vast, endless sea. Infinity all around me, the depths below.

Panic.

What was I doing out here? What was *wrong* with me? I started hyperventilating, twisting myself about. Each wave was a threat trying to pull me underneath the water. I got a mouthful of brine.

Luckily, some gut instinct to survive kicked in and I engaged the spyril, jetting myself up out of the water.

Hanging there, water dripping from my clothing, I gasped for air and squeezed my eyes shut. I wanted to move. I *needed* to move. But in those moments, I could more easily have lifted a semi truck filled with pudding.

That water. All that *water* …

I took a deep breath and tried to slow my breathing, then forced my eyes open. From my vantage hovering on the spyril jets, I could see over the waves. I'd gotten turned around, and had to reorient myself. I'd crossed half the distance and needed to continue, but it was sparking difficult to motivate myself to release the streambeam and fall back down.

With effort, I let myself down, splashing back into the sea. I used the black smoke rising into the sky as a guidepost. I thought of the people inside the building. With no water to jump to, they'd likely be fleeing from the flames above, moving down to the lower levels. But that would leave them to drown when the waters returned.

How horrible a death that would be, trapped inside a building as the waters rushed back in, perversely stuck between the heat above and the cold depths below.

Furious, I increased the speed of the spyril.

Something snapped.

Suddenly, I was spinning in a rush of water and bubbles. I cut the thrust. Blast! One of the footjets had stopped working. I struggled to the surface, coughing, cold. It was really hard to stay afloat with the weight of the now-powerless spyril towing me down and with my clothing still on.

And why was it so hard to float? I was made of mostly water, right? Shouldn't I float easily?

Fighting the swells, I tried to reach down and fix the spyril jet. But I didn't even know what had caused it to stop working, and I wasn't particularly good at swimming unaided. Eventually the inevitable happened and I started sinking. I had to engage the single working jet of my spyril to get back afloat.

I felt like I'd swallowed half the ocean so far. Coughing, I started to panic again as I realized just how dangerous the open waters could be. I positioned my one leg with a working jet behind me, turned the spyril on half power, and pushed myself toward the distant buildings.

I could focus only on keeping myself afloat and pointed toward civilization. It was slow going. Too slow. Keenly, I felt the shame of having rushed in to be a hero only to end up limping along, having nearly created a new crisis instead of solving the first one. What better example of Prof's warnings could I get?

Fortunately, my terror was manageable, so long as I had that spyril jet to give me some measure of control over the situation. As I got closer to the city, the water warmed around me. Eventually, blessedly, I reached one of the outer buildings, a low one with the roof only two stories or so out of the water. The single jet was enough to propel me upward—if at an unexpected angle—and I grabbed the rooftop's lip and hauled myself over, coughing.

Though the spyril had done all the work, I was exhausted. I flopped over, smelling smoke in the air, and stared at the sky.

Those people. I tried to climb to my feet. Maybe I could …

The building blazed nearby, only one street over. Fully alight, the top half had burned completely, an inferno. I could feel the heat even from a distance. This was more than the work of just one or two firebombs. Either Newton had continued throwing more in, or the place had been primed to go up. Around the structure, water coursed in a vortex, revealing a broken, wet street far below.

A few corpses spotted the ground. People had tried to leap free of the flames.

Even as I watched, the water was released. It crashed back in upon the building, and the hissing indicated that the fire had managed to creep down toward those levels that had formerly

been submerged. The impact caused the top floors of the building to collapse into the water, blowing steam into the air with a horrible noise.

I stumbled to my feet, feeling utterly defeated. On a nearby roof I saw Regalia's watery projection standing with hands clasped before her. She looked toward me, then melted into the surface of the sea and vanished.

I collapsed onto the rooftop. Why? It was so pointless.

Prof is right, I thought. *They murder indiscriminately. Why did I think that any of them could be good?*

My pants buzzed. I sighed, fishing out my mobile. I got a little water on it, but Mizzy said it was fully waterproof.

Prof was calling. I lifted the mobile beside my head, ready to accept my lecture. I could see now what had caused the spyril to malfunction—I hadn't done the wires correctly leading to the left leg. They'd come undone. A simple problem, one that wouldn't have happened if I'd been more careful putting on the equipment.

"Yeah," I said into the phone.

"Is she gone?" Prof's voice asked.

"Who?"

"Regalia. She was watching, wasn't she?"

"Yeah."

"Probably still is, remotely," Prof said. He sounded winded. "I'll have to sneak these people out in the sub, somehow."

I stood up. *"Prof?"* I said, excited.

"Don't look too eager," he said with a grunt. "She's probably watching you. Act dejected." In the background, over the line, I heard a child crying. "Can you quiet her?" Prof snapped to someone.

"You're in the building," I said. "You … you saved them!"

"David," Prof said, voice tense. "This is *not* a good time for me. Do you understand?"

He's keeping the water and the flames back, I realized. *With forcefields*.

"Yes," I whispered.

"I left the sub behind. I had to run across the bottom of the ocean to get here."

I blinked in surprise. "Is that *possible*?"

"With a forcefield bubble extending in front of me?" Prof said. "Yeah. Haven't practiced it in ages." He grunted. "I came into the

building from below, by vaporizing a section of ground and crossing over into the basement. I'm going to make a forcefield tunnel through the water for these people and hike back to the building we left. Can you meet me there?"

The thought of going back into the bay nauseated me, but I wasn't about to admit that. "Sure."

"Good."

"Prof …," I said, trying to look morose, though I felt distinctly the opposite. "You're a hero. You really *are*."

"Stop."

"But, you saved—"

"*Stop*."

I fell silent.

"Get back to the building," he said. "I'll need you to pilot the sub and take the people to a place well outside Regalia's range, then let them go. Do you understand?"

"Sure. But why can't you pilot it?"

"Because," Prof said, voice growing soft. "It's going to take every bit of my willpower over the next few minutes not to murder these people for inconveniencing me."

I swallowed. "Got it," I said, then fixed the wires on my boot. I pocketed the phone and pointed the streambeam at the water, testing to make certain everything was operating—then I double-checked the wires just to be certain.

Finally I started out, more carefully this time. It took a long while, but I eventually arrived. Then I had to wait in a room near where we'd docked the submarine for the better part of an hour before I heard sounds.

I stood up as a door opened, and an ashen group of people began to pile out of a hallway. Prof had led them up into another part of the building. I rushed to help, calmed them, then explained how we'd have to enter the submarine in the darkness with everyone being as quiet as possible. We couldn't risk Regalia discovering what Prof had done.

With some effort, I got the coughing, wet, and exhausted group of people into the submarine. There were about forty of them, but we could all fit. Barely.

I helped the last one down, a mother with a baby, then climbed out and crossed through the building to the room where I'd met the people, shining my mobile to make certain I hadn't left

anyone.

Prof stood in the opposite doorway, mostly in shadow. His goggles reflected the light so I couldn't see his eyes. He nodded to me once, then turned around and vanished into the gloom.

I sighed and clicked my mobile off, then walked back to the submarine room and used the ropes to guide me. I climbed in and pulled down the hatch, sealing it, then descended into the crowded sub full of wet people who smelled of smoke. Prof's attitude disturbed me, but it wasn't enough to dispel the warmth I felt inside. He'd done it. Despite his complaints about my recklessness, he'd gone and saved the people himself.

He and I *were* the same. He was just a hell of a lot more competent than I was. I took the sub's front seat and called Val to ask for instructions on how to pilot the thing.

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I set the box of rations down with a thump, then stood and wiped my brow. Several of the Babilaran refugees Prof had saved picked up the boxes and hurried off with them, making quickly for the nearby wreckage of a warehouse. They'd cleaned off some of the soot in the day since I'd dropped them off here in the rotting remains of a small island off the coast of New York, but they seemed to have gained a healthy sense of self-preservation during that time. It must not have been buried very deep.

"Thank you," a woman named Soomi said, bowing. Though it was evening, their spraypainted clothing didn't glow here, so it just looked dirty. Old.

"Just remember our deal," I said.

"We didn't see anything," she promised. "And we won't return to the city for at least a month."

I nodded. Soomi and her people believed that the Reckoners had saved them using secret forcefield technology. They weren't to tell anyone what they'd seen, but even if it got out, hopefully the stories wouldn't implicate Prof as an Epic.

Soomi picked up one of the last boxes and joined the others, hurrying back toward a group of ramshackle buildings with overgrown grounds. It was best not to be seen with food, in case scavengers saw you. Fortunately, the only way off this island was a bridge just to the north, so hopefully they would be safe here.

My heart wrenched to see them without homes or possessions, cast adrift, but this was all we could do. And it was maybe more than we should have done—we'd needed to have Cody airlift us supplies out of Newcago to provide rations for these people.

I turned and made my way down an empty, broken street, rifle

over my shoulder. It was a short walk to the old dock where we'd parked the submarine. Val lounged, seated on top of it. She'd stacked the boxes of food on the dock, while the refugees and I had carried them inside.

I hesitated on the dock, looking out toward Babilar to the southwest. It glowed with surreal colors, like a portal to some other dimension. Though the water extending out before me looked flat, I knew that it sloped upward slightly. Regalia had sculpted this city's look intentionally; she even maintained different water levels in different parts of Babilar, creating handcrafted neighborhoods of rooftops and sunken streets.

She does care, I thought. *She built this city like she intended to stay here, to rule. She made it inviting.*

So why destroy it now?

"Coming?" Val called to me.

I nodded and crossed the dock and scrambled aboard the sub—this area was outside of Regalia's range of sight, theoretically, so we could let it surface in the open.

"Hey," Val said as I passed, "when are you going to tell me how you saved them? For real, I mean."

I hesitated at the hatch, light from down inside rising to bathe me. "I used the spyril," I said.

"Yeah, but how?"

"I put out the fire in a room," I said, using the lie Tia and I had prepared. We'd been expecting Val or Exel to prod eventually. "I was able to crowd everyone into the same room, then keep them safe and quiet until Regalia thought everyone was dead. Then I snuck them out."

It was a good enough lie. Val didn't know that the building had basically collapsed once the water came rushing back in. It was plausible that I'd have been able to get the people out.

Good lie or not, I hated telling it. Couldn't Prof be straight with the members of his own team?

Val regarded me carefully, and though her face was too much in shadows to read, I felt like the only rotten strawberry in a line of strawberries. Finally, she shrugged. "Well, nice work."

I hurriedly slipped down into the submarine. Val followed, then locked the hatch and moved to the front seat. She didn't believe what I'd told her, not completely. I could read it in the stiff way she sat down, the too-controlled sound of her voice as she called

Tia and said we were on our way back to the supply dump to get the next set of boxes, which would restock our base.

I fidgeted, and we moved under the waves and traveled for a while in silence. Finally, I forced myself to get into the copilot's seat next to Val at the front. I still knew next to nothing about Val. Maybe some disarming conversation would ease her suspicion about what had happened the day before.

"So," I said, "I notice you prefer a Colt 1911. A good, time-tested gun. Is that a Springfield frame and slide set?"

"Don't know, honestly," she said, glancing at the gun she wore on her hip. "Sam gave it to me."

"But, I mean, surely you need to know. For replacement parts."

Val shrugged. "It's just a gun. If it breaks, I'll get another."

Just a …

Just a gun? Had she really *said* that?

I found my mouth working, but no sound coming out, as we puttered beneath the waves. The gun you carried was literally your life—if it malfunctioned, you could be dead. How could she say something like that?

Be disarming, I told myself forcefully. *Chastising her won't make her more comfortable around you*.

"So, uh," I said, coughing into my hand, "you must have enjoyed it here, on this assignment. Sweet undersea base, no Epics to fight, a city full of good-natured people. Must be the best job a Reckoner team could get assigned."

"Sure," Val said. "Until one of my friends got murdered."

And now I was "replacing" that friend in the team. Great. Another reminder why she shouldn't like me.

"You've known Mizzy for a while," I said, trying another tactic. "You didn't grow up in the city, did you?"

"No."

"Where were you stationed before this?"

"Mexico. But you shouldn't ask about our pasts. It's against protocol."

"Just trying to—"

"I know what you're trying to do. It's not necessary. I'll do my job; you do yours."

"Sure," I said. "All right." I settled back in my seat.

Wait. Mexico? I perked up. "You … weren't in on the Hermosillo job, were you?"

Val eyed me, but said nothing.

"The hit on Puños de Fuego!" I exclaimed.

"How do you know about that?" Val asked.

"Oh man. Was it true, did he really throw a *tank* at you?"

Val kept her eyes forward, tapping a button on the sub's control panel. "Yeah," she finally said. "An *entire* flippin' tank. Broke open the wall of our base of operations."

"Wow."

"What's more, I was running ops."

"So you—"

"Yeah. I was inside when this tank comes crashing right through the wall. He'd dodged around Sam and managed to double back, so he could hit our operations station. Still not sure how he even knew where we were."

I grinned, imagining it. Puños had been a beastly strength Epic, capable of lifting practically anything—even things that should have broken apart as he did it. Not a High Epic, but hard to kill, with enhanced endurance and skin like an elephant's.

"I never did figure out how you beat him," I said. "Only that the team eventually took him out, despite the job going wrong."

Val kept her gaze trained straight ahead, but I caught a hint of a smile on her lips.

"What?" I asked.

"Well … I was there," she said, growing slightly more animated, "in the rubble of our operations station—a little brick building in the center of the city. And he was coming for me. I was alone, no support."

"And?"

"And … well, there was a *tank* in the room."

"You didn't."

"Yeah," Val said. "At first I climbed into the thing just to hide. But then, it was armed, and he walked right in front of the barrel. The tank was on its side, but it had crashed in through the wall rear-end-first. So I figured, what the hell?"

"You shot him."

"Yeah."

"With a tank."

"Yeah."

"That's *awesome*."

"It was stupid," Val said, though she was still smiling. "If that

barrel had been bent, I'd probably have blown myself up instead. But … well, it worked. Sam said he found Puños's arm seven streets over." She looked at me, then seemed to realize who she was talking to. Her expression dimmed.

"Sorry," I said.

"For what?"

"For not being Sam."

"That's stupid," Val said, turning away from me. She hesitated. "You're kind of infectious, Steelslayer. You know that?"

"It's my gritty, determined manliness."

"Um. No. It's not. But it might be your enthusiasm." She shook her head and pulled back on the steering column, raising the sub up toward the surface. "Either way, you can go be manly hauling boxes. We've arrived."

I smiled, glad to have finally had a conversation with Val that didn't involve a lot of scowling. I got up and made my way over to the ladder. The door to the bathroom was rattling again. We really needed to get Mizzy to fix the blasted thing. I nudged it closed with my toe, then I climbed up and opened the hatch.

The land up above was pitch-black, darkness fully upon us. This supply dump wasn't as far up the coast as City Island, but we should be well outside Regalia's range. Still, it seemed a good idea to never leave the sub without someone in it, so I'd fetch the boxes and carry them the short distance to the coast, then set them down for Val. She'd get them from shore to the sub, then carry them down the ladder and stack them.

I shouldered my rifle and climbed out onto a quiet dock, water lapping against the wood, as if to pointedly remind me that it was still there. I hurried across the dock and approached a dark building ahead, an old shed where Cody had unloaded our supplies.

I slipped inside. At least there wouldn't be as many boxes this time around. We probably should have carried them all down before, but our arms had been aching, and a short break had sounded really nice.

I turned on the light on my mobile and checked the room.

Then I pulled open the hidden trapdoor in the floor, and climbed down to check on Prof.

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BURROWED into the rock beneath the shed was one of the secret Reckoner stopover bases, set up with a cot, some supplies, and a workbench. Prof stood by the bench, holding up a beaker and inspecting it by the light of a lantern. That was an improvement; when I'd come down here before, he'd been lying on the cot looking through some old photos—they lay scattered on the cot now.

Prof didn't look up as I came down. "We're grabbing the rest of the supplies," I said, thumbing over my shoulder. "You need anything?"

Prof shook his head and stirred his beaker.

"You going to be all right?" I asked.

"I'm feeling fine," Prof said. "I'm planning to head back into the city a little later in the evening. Might return to the base tomorrow; might stay away another day. We'll need to give it enough time that Val's team will believe I went to check in on another Reckoner cell."

That had been Tia's explanation for his absence. I watched curiously as he mixed another beaker with a liquid of a different color.

"We're hitting Newton in two days," I told him. "Tia made the call, since she said you weren't being responsive."

Two days was well before Obliteration's expected deadline, which would give us some wiggle room in case things went poorly.

He grunted. "Two days? I'll be back by then." He mixed the two beakers into a jar and stepped back. A large jet of foam launched from the container, reaching almost to the ceiling, then

fell back in a frothy splat. Prof watched, then smiled.

"Hydrogen peroxide mixed with potassium iodide," he said. "The kids used to love that one." He reached over and started mixing some other materials.

"Could you come back sooner?" I asked him. "We still don't have a plan to deal with Obliteration, and he's got a gun to the city's head."

"I'm working on how to deal with that," Prof said. "I think if we bring down Regalia, it might scare him away. If it doesn't, we might find intel on his weakness among her notes."

"And if we don't?"

"We evacuate the city," Prof said.

Tia had theorized the same possibility, but it seemed like a bad option to me. We couldn't start a theoretical evacuation until Regalia was dead—otherwise she'd surely move against the fleeing people. I doubted we'd have enough time to get everyone out before Obliteration wasted the place.

"Tell Tia to call me a little later tonight," Prof said. "We'll talk about it."

"Sure thing," I said, then paused as he worked on another mixture. "What are you doing?"

"Another experiment."

"Why?"

"Because," he said, turning away. His face fell into shadow. "Remembering the old days helps. Remembering the students, and their excitement, their joy. The memories seem to push it back."

I nodded slowly, but he wasn't looking at me. He'd returned to his science experiment. So instead I inched forward to see if I could catch a glimpse of the photos he'd been looking at.

I reached the cot and leaned down and picked one up. The photo showed a younger version of Prof, wearing casual clothing —jeans, a T-shirt—standing with some people in a room filled with monitors and computers. Other people were scattered throughout the room, wearing uniform blue shirts.

Prof glanced at me.

I held up the photo. "Some kind of lab?"

"NASA," he said, sounding reluctant. "The old space program."

"I thought you said you were a schoolteacher!"

"I'm not the one who worked there, genius," Prof said. "Look

more closely."

I looked back down, and realized that in the photo Prof looked more like a tourist, grinning and getting his picture taken. It took me a second to spot that one of the many people in the photo wearing a blue NASA shirt had short red hair. Tia.

"Tia's a *rocket scientist*?" I asked.

"Was," Prof said. "That was a long time ago. She let me visit right after we first started dating. Highlight of my life—bragged about it to my students for months."

I looked down at the picture. The man in this photo, though it was obviously Prof, looked like a different species entirely. Where were the lines of worry on the man's face, the haunted eyes, the imposing stature?

Nearly thirteen years of Calamity had changed this man. And not just because of the powers he'd gained.

Another photo peeked out from underneath the sheet. I pulled it out. And Prof didn't stop me, turning back to his experiment.

In this picture, four people stood in a line. One was Prof, wearing his now-trademark black lab coat, goggles in the pocket. Beside him Regalia stood with hand outstretched, a glob of water hovering above her fingers. She wore an elegant blue gown. Tia was there, and there was another man, one I didn't know. Older, with white-grey hair sticking out from his head in an almost crown shape, he sat in a chair while the others stood.

"Who is this man?" I asked.

"Those are also memories from another time," Prof said, not turning to me. "And ones I'd rather not revisit."

"Because of Regalia?"

"Because I thought the world could be a different place back then," Prof said, stirring a solution. "A place of heroes."

"Maybe it still can be that place. Maybe we're wrong about what is causing the darkness, or maybe there's a way to resist it. Everyone's been wrong about the Epic weaknesses, after all. Maybe we don't understand all of this as well as we think."

Instead of replying, Prof set down his beaker. He turned toward me. "And you're not afraid of what would happen if we fail?"

"I'm willing to risk it, Prof."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Can I trust you, David Charleston?"

"Yes. Of course." Where had that question come from? It didn't

seem to follow our conversation.

He studied me, then nodded. “Good. I’ve changed my mind. Tell Tia I’ll head into the city as soon as you leave; she can tell Val and Exel that the emergency with the other Reckoner team got solved quickly, and I came back early.”

“All right.” Prof had a motorboat from a hidden Reckoner dock. He could get back to the city on his own easily. “But what was that about trusting—”

“Go finish loading those boxes, son.” He turned around and began packing up his things.

I sighed, but put the picture down and climbed up, closing the trapdoor, leaving him in the hidden chamber. I grabbed a box of supplies, then almost ran headfirst into Val as I left.

“David?” she said. “What were you *doing* in there?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Had to catch a breather.”

“But—”

“You left the sub?” I asked.

“I—”

I hurried past her. Sparks! What if some scavenger found it and decided to take it on a joyride? Fortunately, it was still there, sitting in the calm black waters.

Val and I got the boxes loaded quickly, with minimal conversation. I tried to bring Val out again with some questions, but she didn’t say much. Even during our ride back in the sub she was mostly quiet. She knew I was hiding something. Well, I didn’t blame her for feeling annoyed at that—I felt the same way about the entire situation, honestly.

At the base, we docked and climbed out into the dark room. The docking mechanism was completely airtight, fitted exactly to the submarine. Quite ingenious. They still left the room dark though, in case of a leak. Even outside of Regalia’s range the Reckoners were careful. It was one of the things I liked about them.

I found the guide ropes in the darkness and grabbed two pairs of night-vision goggles off the rack on the wall. I handed one down to Val, then put on the other pair. Together we began unloading the boxes. Eventually I grabbed one and hefted it onto my shoulder, then left the darkened docking room and hauled the box toward the storage room down the hallway.

The bright Reckoner base—with its plush couches and dark

woods—was an enormous contrast to the desolate landscapes I'd spent the day visiting. It was almost like being in a different world. I carried the box to the storage room and set it down. Behind me I could hear voices from the radio drifting out of Exel's room. He was pulling extra hours on recon duty, listening to broadcasts, double—and triple—checking Newton's routes.

There were more boxes to unload, but I figured I should pass on Prof's message first. I walked down the hallway and rapped on Tia's door.

"Come in," she said.

On the walls she'd plastered maps of Babilar that showed Newton's routes. In the center of the city, several pins noted where Tia thought Regalia might be hiding. There were still too many buildings to search effectively without giving away what we were doing, but we were close.

A dozen or so empty cola pouches lay in the corner of the room, and Tia looked bad. A few stray strands of hair had escaped her bun and stuck out, like frizzy ginger lightning bolts. She had bags under her eyes and her normally pristine business suit hadn't been pressed in days.

"He was there," I said.

She glanced up at me. "What did he say?"

"He says he'll come back tonight. We'll probably need to send the sub back to the city to pick him up. He seems like he's mostly recovered."

"Thank goodness," she said, leaning back in her chair.

"Val's suspicious," I said. "You should tell her what's really going on."

"I wish I knew what was really going on," Tia grumbled.

"What—"

"I don't mean with Jon," Tia said. "Ignore me. I was just venting. Here, I want to show you something."

Tia stood up and walked to the wall, tapping on a section of it. We'd set up the imager in here to turn the wall into a smart screen, like Prof preferred to use as he worked. Tia's tap brought up an image of Knoxx, the Epic in Newton's crew I'd spotted the other day. The wall played the video of him transforming into a bird and flying away. My jerking of the scope followed, tracking the bird poorly until I found it on the other building. The transformation happened again. Tia stopped the screen on the

figure and zoomed in on his face. The close-up was grainy, but he was still recognizable.

"What would you say about what you just saw?"

"At least class C self-transmutation abilities," I said. "He was able to change his mass as well as retain his original thought process after transforming; either alone would elevate the transmutation from class D. I'd have to know if he can take other shapes, and whether there are limits like how often he can change, before I can say more."

"This man," Tia said, "has been part of Newton's gang for years. Exel confirmed it with several points of evidence. There is no evidence before this moment that Knoxx had any powers. This means that somehow, Newton or Regalia convinced him to hide his abilities for years. I'm worried, David. If she can hide Epics in plain sight, and can prevent them from displaying their powers, our intel in this city—despite our long investment of time—might be worthless."

I frowned, stepping up to the image and taking a closer look. "What if he wasn't hiding his powers?" I asked. "What if he only gained them recently."

Tia looked at me. "You seriously think Regalia can make people into Epics?"

"I'm not convinced, but she obviously wants us to believe she can create Epics, or at least enhance their abilities. Perhaps she has access to a gifter, or some kind of Epic we've never seen before, and fakes granting powers. Or … maybe she simply *can* create new Epics. Seems to me that as much as we'd like to, we can't judge what is unreasonable when applied to Epics."

"Perhaps," Tia admitted. She sat down in her chair beside the desk and fished out another pouch of cola.

"You don't like being forced to take charge," I realized. "To run the operation, without Prof."

"I'm fully capable of being in command," she said.

"That's an answer in the same way that ketchup can be hair gel."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You see, it's technically true, but—"

"I understood," Tia said.

"You … did?"

"Yes. And you're right. Jon is the leader, David. I manage

things; I make the pieces fit together. But *he* has the vision; he sees things others don't. Not because of his … abilities. Just because of who he is. Without him to look over this plan, I worry I'm going to miss something important."

"He says he'll be back in time to help."

"I hope so," Tia said. "Because honestly, that man sure can mope with the best of them when he wants to."

"Was he like that before?"

She eyed me.

"He told me about NASA," I noted. "I saw a picture of you two there, together. I'm impressed."

She sniffed. "Did he tell you *why* I had to invite him to visit?"

"I assumed it was because you two were together."

"We'd only just started dating," Tia said. "Another teacher in his school won a contest we were holding—come pretend to be an astronaut for a few weeks. Train, go through the tests, that sort of thing. We did it occasionally for PR reasons."

"And Prof didn't win?" I asked.

"He didn't enter," Tia said. "He *hated* contests. Wouldn't even put a quarter into a slot machine. But that didn't stop him from feeling torn apart when he didn't get to go." She stared at her pouch of cola without opening it. "We sometimes forget how human he is, David. He's just a man, despite it all. A man full of feelings that, at times, don't make sense. We're all like that. We want what we can't have, even when we have no right to demand it."

"It *will* be all right, Tia."

She seemed surprised by the tone of my voice, and looked up at me.

"You see, he's *not* just a man, Tia," I said. "He's a hero."

"You sound like one of them."

Them?

And then it hit me—she meant the Faithful. Sparks, it was true. *Where there are villains, there will be heroes. Just wait. They* will *come.*… My father's words, on the day he died.

As recently as a few months ago, I'd regarded the optimism of people like Abraham and Mizzy as foolishness. What had changed?

It was Prof. I couldn't believe in some mythical Epics who may or may not someday arrive to save the world. But him … him I

could believe in.

I met Tia's gaze.

"Well," she said, "finish unloading supplies, then get your gear together. I want you to go install a camera to watch Obliteration and give us a constant visual. We don't know for certain if his energy storage will progress at the same rate as it did previously. I'd rather not be surprised."

I nodded and left the room, closing the door behind me. I walked down the hallway and passed the storage chamber, where I found that Mizzy had been recruited to start carrying the boxes in. She set one down and gave me a perky smile before heading off for another.

I couldn't help grinning after her. She was the definition of what it meant to have an infectious personality. The world was a better place because Missouri Williams was in it.

"Why is it," a voice said softly from beside me, "that every time I find you these days, you're ogling some girl?"

I turned to look and there, standing just inside the storage room, was Megan.

33

MEGAN.

Megan was inside the Reckoner base.

I let out a sound that was definitely not a whimper. It was something far more manly, no matter what it sounded like.

I glanced after Mizzy in a moment of panic, then stepped into the storage room, taking Megan by the arm. “What are you doing!”

“We need to talk,” she said. “And you were ignoring me.”

“I wasn’t ignoring you. Things have just been very busy.”

“Busy looking at women’s backsides.”

“I wasn’t … Wait.” It hit me and I smiled. “You sound jealous!”

“Don’t be a buffoon.”

“No,” I said. “You were jealous.” I found I couldn’t stop grinning.

Megan seemed confused. “Normally, that’s not something people smile about.”

“It means you care,” I said.

“Oh please.”

Time to say something suave. Something romantic. My brain, which had been working a few steps behind all day, finally came to my rescue. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I’d rather ogle you any day.”

Wait.

Megan sighed, peeking out into the hallway past me. “You are a buffoon,” she said under her breath. “Is she likely to come back here?”

Right. Enemy High Epic. Reckoner base. “I’m assuming you’re not here to turn yourself in?” I said softly.

“Turn myself in? Sparks, no. I just needed to talk to someone.

You were the most convenient."

"This is convenient?" I asked.

Megan looked at me and blushed. A blush looked really good on her. Of course, so would soup, mud, or elephant earwax. Megan on a bad day outshined anyone else I'd ever known.

"Come on," I said, taking her by the arm. I didn't want to encourage her to use her powers to hide, not when she was so obviously acting like the Megan I'd known before. Which meant moving quickly. I towed her after me in a heart-pounding rush down the hallway toward my room.

We got there without being spotted. I pulled her in, then shut the door, pressing my back to it and exhaling like an epileptic pilot who'd just landed a cargo plane full of dynamite.

Megan inspected the room. "You didn't get one with a porthole, I see. Still the new kid on the team, eh?"

"Something like that."

"Nice, anyway," she said, strolling forward. "Better than a metal hole in the ground."

"Megan," I said. "How … I mean, does anyone else out there know where our base is?"

She met my gaze, then shook her head. "Not so far as I know. I don't meet with Regalia often—I don't think she trusts me—but from what I've heard of the others, they're searching for you. Regalia thinks your base is somewhere on the northern coast, and seems thoroughly annoyed that she hasn't been able to find it."

"How did you find us, then?" I asked.

"Steelheart had me bug everyone in the team," she said.

"So you …"

"I can listen in," Megan said, "on some of your calls. Or I could, for a while. Phaedrus is paranoid, changes both his phone and Tia's regularly. Yours is dead. I can only listen in these days if someone calls Abraham or Cody."

"The supply shipment," I said. "You heard where it was, got there before us, then snuck onto the submarine."

Megan nodded.

"I was there," I said. "I didn't see you at all! Were you using your powers?"

"Nah," Megan said, flopping back onto the bed, lying across it sideways. "I only needed good old-fashioned stealth."

"But …"

“I was about to sneak aboard after you’d been out of the sub for a while, and then Val came out following you and nearly gave me a heart attack. But I ducked just in time, then went in and hid in the bathroom.”

I grinned, though she couldn’t see it—she was staring at the ceiling. “You’re amazing,” I said.

The corners of her lips tugged up at that, though she remained staring upward. “It’s getting really difficult, David.”

“Difficult?”

“Not using my powers.”

I scrambled up to the side of the bed. “You’ve been doing what I asked? Avoiding the abilities?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I don’t know why I listen to you. Just makes life difficult. I mean, I’m basically a divinity, right? So I end up hiding in a bathroom?”

I settled down, sitting on the bed beside her. The tension in her voice, that look in her eyes. “Is it working?” I asked. “Do you feel like murdering people indiscriminately?”

“I always feel like murdering you. If only just a little.”

I waited.

“Yes,” Megan finally said with a sigh. “It’s working. It’s driving me insane in other ways, but not using my powers has removed some of the … tendencies from my mind. But I honestly don’t ever feel like killing people. For me, it manifests more as irritability and selfishness.”

“Huh,” I said. “Why do you think that is?”

“Probably because I’m not very powerful.”

“Megan, you’re a High Epic! You’re wicked powerful.”

“*Wicked?*”

“Heard it in a movie once.”

“Whatever. I’m not a very powerful Epic, David. I have to use a gun for Calamity’s sake! I can reincarnate, yes, but have you seen how weak my illusions are?”

“I think they’re pretty awesome.”

“I’m not fishing for compliments, David,” she said. “We’re trying to get me to not use my powers, remember?”

“Sorry. Uh, wow. Your powers are so lame. They’re like, about as useful as an eight-by-eighty mounted on a twelve-gauge firing birdshot.”

She looked at me, then started laughing. “Oh sparks. You’d

have a real good view of the pheasant dying, though."

"Up close and personal," I said. "The way avian massacres were meant to happen."

This made her laugh more, and I grinned. She seemed to need the laughter. There was a desperation to it; though it did occur to me that we should make sure to keep things quiet.

Megan stretched her arms back, then folded them on her stomach, sighing.

"Feel good?" I asked.

"You don't know what it's like," she said softly. "It's horrible."

"Tell me anyway."

She glanced at me.

"I'd like to know," I said. "I've made a habit of … ending people with these powers. I don't know if it will make me feel better or worse to know what they're going through, but I think I should hear it either way."

She looked back at the ceiling and didn't speak at first. I'd left one light on in the room, a small reddish-orange lamp with a glass shade. The room was silent, though I thought sometimes I could hear the ocean outside. Waves surging, water rolling. It was probably just my imagination.

"It's not like a voice," Megan said. "I've read what some of Tia's scholars write, and they treat it like schizophrenia. They claim that Epics have something like an evil conscience telling them what to do, which is a load of crap. It's nothing like that.

"You know how, some mornings, you just feel a little angry at the world?" she continued. "Or you're irritable, so that small things—things that normally wouldn't annoy you—set you off? It's like that. Only mixed with an inability to care about consequences.

"Even that's kind of normal—I've been there, felt like that, long before I got these powers. You know how it is when you're up late, and you know that if you don't go to bed, you're going to hate life the next day? Then you stay up anyway, because you don't care? It's like that. As an Epic, you just don't care. After all, you deserve to be able to do what you want. And if you go too far, you can change later. Always later."

She closed her eyes as she spoke, and I felt a chill. I had felt like she'd described. Who hasn't? Listening to her, it seemed perfectly logical to me that an Epic should do what they do. That

horrified me.

"But you've changed," I told Megan. "You've resisted."

"For a few days," she said. "It's hard, David. Really, really hard. Like going without water."

"You said it's easier when you're near me."

She opened her eyes and glanced over at me. "Yeah."

"So there's a secret to beating it."

"Not necessarily. A lot of things relating to Epics don't make any sense."

"Everyone says that," I replied, standing and walking to my desk. "We say it so much, I wonder if we just take it for granted. Here, look at this." I dug out my research on Epic weaknesses.

"What's this?" Megan said, standing up as well. She walked over and leaned down next to me, her head so close to mine. "You going all-out nerd on me again, Knees?"

"I've been finding connections between Epics and their weaknesses," I said, pointing at my notes on Mitosis, then Sourcefield. "We say the weaknesses are random, right? Well, there are some large coincidences related to these two."

Megan read. "His own music?" she asked. "Huh."

"What about Steelheart?" I asked, excited. "His powers were negated by people who didn't fear him. You knew him—is there something in his past you can connect to his weakness?"

"It's not like we went to dinner parties together," Megan said dryly. "Most people in the city, even the higher-ups, didn't even know about me. All they knew was 'Firefight,' my dimensional double."

"Your … what?"

"Long story," Megan said, distracted as she looked over my notes on Sourcefield. "Steelheart wanted to keep everything about me as secret as possible. So he kept his distance from the real me, so as not to draw attention. Sparks, he kept his distance from pretty much everyone."

"There's a connection here," I said, flicking the papers with one hand. "There's a connection to all of it, Megan. Maybe even a reason."

I expected her to object, like both Prof and Tia had. Instead, she nodded.

"You agree?" I asked.

"This was done to me," Megan said. "Against my will. I became

an Epic. I'd sure like to know if there was more meaning to it all. So yeah, I'm willing to believe." She still stared at the page. "More than willing, maybe."

It was hard not to notice how near to me she was standing, her cheek almost brushing my own. The urge to reach out and pull her even closer was so powerful that, in that moment, I thought I understood how she must feel being drawn to use her abilities.

"If there is a connection to the weakness," I said, to distract myself, "there might be a secret to overcoming the influence of the powers. We can get you out of this, Megan."

"Maybe," she said, then shook her head. "So help me, if this is related to 'the power of love' or some similar kind of bull, I'm going to strangle somebody…." Her face was right next to mine. So close.

"The power of w-what?" I stammered.

"Don't read too much into that."

"Oh."

She smiled. So, figuring it couldn't hurt—the worst she could do was shoot me—I leaned forward to kiss her. This time, remarkably, she didn't pull away.

It felt fantastic. I didn't have much experience, and I'd heard these things were supposed to be awkward, but this time—for once in my life—nothing went wrong. She pressed her lips against mine, head tilted to the side, and wrapped her arms around me, warm and inviting. It felt like … like …

Like something fantastic I didn't ever want to end. And wasn't going to try to explain, lest I somehow screw it up.

A little voice in the back of my head did buzz a warning, though. *Dude. You're making out with an Epic*.

I turned that piece of me off. How easy it was to not worry about consequences in that moment, just as Megan had said. I barely heard the knock come at my door.

I did notice, however, when that door started to open.

34

MEGAN broke from me and I spun around. Tia—distractedly looking at the tablet in her hands—pushed the door open. She looked up, then right at me.

I went cold.

"Hey," Tia said. "I want to send Val to plant some supplies for the hit on Newton. We can have her drop you off, and you can go place that camera for me. Would you mind? I'd rather not wait."

"Uh … sure." I resisted the urge to look around for Megan. She'd been standing just beside me.

Tia nodded, then hesitated. "Did I startle you?"

I looked down at the stack of papers I'd dropped, without noticing it, during the kiss. "Just feeling clumsy today, I guess," I said.

"Be ready in five," she said, setting a small box on my side table—the remote camera. She glanced at me again, then left.

Sparks! I hurried over and shut the door, then looked back at the room. "Megan?" I asked softly.

"Ow." The voice came from under the bed.

I walked over and looked down. Megan had apparently thrown herself to the ground and rolled expertly under the bed. It was pretty cramped down there.

"Nice," I said to her.

"I feel like a teenager," she complained, "dodging my boyfriend's mother."

"I feel like a teenager too," I said. "Because I am one."

"Don't remind me," she grumbled, climbing out and rubbing her forehead, which she'd scraped on something under the bed. "You're like five years younger than I am."

“Five … Megan, how old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“I turned nineteen right before we left Newcago,” I said. “You’ve got *one year* on me.”

“Like I said. You’re practically a baby.” She held out her hand and let me pull her to her feet.

“We could go talk to Tia,” I said as she stood. “Prof’s not here, and Tia’s more likely to listen to you. I’ve been working on them, explaining that you didn’t kill Sam. I think she’ll give you a chance to speak for yourself.”

Megan frowned and looked away. “Not right now.”

“But—”

“I don’t want to face her, David. It’s tough enough dealing with all of this right now without worrying about Tia.”

I puffed out a breath. “Fine. But we’re going to have to sneak you out somehow.”

“Walk down the hallway, distract anyone you run into, and clear me a path. I’ll hide in the sub again.”

“I guess.” I walked to the door slowly.

“David,” Megan said.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Coming down here was crazy,” she said.

“Completely crazy,” I agreed.

“Well, thanks for being crazy with me. I kind of need a friend.” She grimaced. “Sparks. I hate admitting things like that. Don’t tell anyone I said it?”

I smiled. “I’ll be quiet as a buttered snail sneaking through a Frenchman’s kitchen.”

I grabbed my rifle from beside the door, slung it over my shoulder, and struck out into the hallway. It was empty. From the looks of the storage closet, Mizzy and Val had finished unloading the boxes; hopefully they weren’t annoyed at me for ditching them. I slipped all the way down the hallway and entered the sitting room, the lavish chamber that connected to the submarine dock.

No signs of anyone in here. I turned around.

Val was standing behind me.

“Gah!” I exclaimed.

“Looks like we’re going right out again,” she said.

“Uh … yeah.”

Val passed me wordlessly, moving toward the door to the docking room. I needed to give Megan an opening. If Val went inside, there'd be no chance of Megan sneaking into the sub without her noticing.

"Wait!" I yelled. "I need to grab the spyril."

"Go get it then," she said.

"Right." I waited in place for a moment, shuffling from one foot to the other.

"Well?" Val asked, pausing at the door into the docking room.

"Last time I used the spyril, something went wrong. I ended up losing my propulsion in the middle of the bay."

Val sighed.

Come on, I urged.

"You want me to check it over?" she asked, though it was clear it was the last thing she wanted to do.

I let out a breath. "That would be awesome."

"Well, go grab it then."

I ran to get it, noticing, happily, how Val lingered in the sitting room. When I passed the library, Megan glanced out at me—she'd made it that far. I nodded toward Val, held up one finger, and grabbed the spyril pack from the storage room.

I hurried back to Val, then began setting out the spyril's parts on a couch—positioned so that when Val walked over to look at them, she'd have her back to the door to the docking room. Val went over the spyril's pieces quickly and efficiently, checking each for scratches, then ensuring that the cords were attached correctly and tightly.

As Val worked, Megan slipped into the room behind us, then eased open the door into the docking chamber. She vanished into the darkness beyond.

"If something went wrong," Val said, "it wasn't the equipment's fault."

"You look like you know a lot about the equipment," I said, nodding toward the spyril. "Almost as much as Mizzy does."

"Come on," Val said, placing the last set of wires back into the pack. If I'd made any kind of connection with her earlier in the sub, I couldn't spot a sign of it now. She was back to being cold.

"Val, I really am sorry about Sam," I said. "I'm sure nobody could ever replace him, but someone has to use this equipment, and someone has to run point."

“I don’t care that you’re using the spyril. Honestly, how unprofessional do you think I am?”

“Then why are you so terse with me?”

“I’m terse with everyone,” she said, then tossed me the pack and walked toward the docking room.

I grabbed my rifle and followed. Together we entered the short hallway between rooms and I closed the door behind me, plunging us into darkness. From there we crossed and opened the door into the docking room, where we followed the familiar guide ropes that led us to the submarine.

Had I given Megan enough time? Sweating, I waited as Val undid the hatch down into the vehicle. Megan would have had to make her way through the unfamiliar room, open the hatch, then slip in and redo it.

I was given no clues as to whether she’d managed it or not. I climbed down and resealed the hatch while Val settled into the driver’s seat. She turned on the soft emergency-style lights and took us down into the depths.

I glanced back anxiously at the bathroom, but nothing seemed out of place. What followed was a short, tense trip through the darkened waters of Babilar. Val didn’t try to strike up any conversation as we traveled, and though I wished I could do something about the strained awkwardness between us, I just couldn’t manage it right then. Not with the stress of Megan hiding just feet from us.

Eventually Val let us up in the middle of a still, black bay among glowing buildings, none of them too close. We didn’t always use the half-sunken buildings for docking. Regalia couldn’t look everywhere, and so long as we were quiet, a quick drop-off in the middle of a deserted bay could be stealthier than using the same docking stations over and over.

I peeked out through the hatch, inspecting the distant lights, which were mirrored in the waters below. This city was so *surreal*. Never mind those glows, the phantom sounds of radios playing music in the distance. I still wasn’t used to buildings with so much variety to them—stonework, glass, bricks.

I climbed back down and regarded the wetsuit. Then I reluctantly started pulling off my shirt.

“There’s a bathroom in the back, kid,” Val said dryly.

I glanced at it and found myself imagining being forced into

that small room with Megan, pressed against her, somehow trying to change without alerting Val of what was going on. Blushing at the thought, I reminded myself that Megan would probably end up stabbing me or something if we were confined in such a tight space.

I wanted to try anyway.

Unfortunately, my brain seized upon a better idea. Stupid brain. "It looks really cramped in there," I said. "I don't suppose you'd mind going up above?"

Val sighed loudly, but she got up from her seat and brushed past me, climbing up the ladder. I stripped down to my boxers and grabbed the wetsuit.

"You don't look half bad with your shirt off," Megan noted quietly. "For a nerd."

I about fell over, one leg into the wetsuit. Megan had slipped out of the bathroom without me noticing. I'd assumed she'd stay in there until I'd dressed, but apparently not. I worked more quickly, trying to hide my blush.

"Nice work, by the way," Megan whispered. "I was afraid I'd have to ride off with Val, then sneak out on my own. This will be far more convenient. Think you can distract her up above?"

"Sure," I said.

"For a second," Megan added, "I thought you were going to be forced into the bathroom there with me. Too bad. It would have been amusing to watch you squirm."

I left the wetsuit unzipped, grabbed my rifle and the box with the spyril, then gave Megan a glare. She didn't seem the least bit concerned.

She's not trapped in our base any longer, I thought. *Here there's only Val to worry about.* Megan seemed confident she could deal with that, should it become a problem. She was probably right.

I hiked up the ladder and undid the latch, then set the spyril on the top of the sub before climbing out. I wore the rifle slung across my back, its straps pulled tight. It wouldn't be easily accessible, but I wouldn't have to worry about losing it in the water.

Val stood, back to the hatch, watching the city. I walked over to her, then pointed to the unzipped back of my suit. "Little help, please?"

I made sure to keep her positioned away from the opening into

the sub. Once zipped, I didn't look to see if Megan had escaped, but instead put on the spyril. "I have a lot of work to do," Val said as she passed me and climbed down the hatch. "I'll be at it for a few hours, at least. So if you finish before then, find a way to entertain yourself. I'll let you know when I'm ready for you."

I activated the spyril and jumped out into the water. I didn't need to worry about my rifle; it would work fine after being submerged.

Val climbed back inside and locked the hatch. I treaded water there for a moment until the sub lowered into the ocean, revealing Megan in the water on the other side, looking wet and miserable.

"N-nice night," she said, shivering.

"It's not even that cold," I said.

"Says the guy in the wetsuit." She looked around. "Think there are sharks in here?"

"That's what *I* keep wondering!"

"I've never trusted water in the darkness." She paused. "Well, I don't really care for it at all."

"Didn't you grow up in Portland?" I asked.

"Yeah, so?"

"So … it's like a port, right? So didn't you ever go swimming there?"

"In the *Willamette?*"

"Uh … yeah?"

"Um, let's just say no. I did not." She glanced toward one of the distant buildings. "Sparks. If I get eaten because of you, Knees, I'm never going to let you hear the end of it."

"At least you'd come back from being eaten," I said.

"Doesn't make me eager to try the experience." She sighed. "So we swim?"

"Not exactly," I said. I swam over to her and held out my arm. "Grab hold of me." She hesitantly wrapped her arms around my chest just under my arms.

With Megan holding on tightly, I pointed the streambeam into the ocean, then engaged the spyril. We rose on jets of water, a good thirty feet in the air. The black, glassy surface of the sea stretched out around us, the towers of submerged Manhattan rising beyond like neon sentries.

Megan breathed out softly, still holding on to me. "Not bad."

“You haven’t seen the spyril in action?”

She shook her head.

“Then might I suggest you hang on?” I said.

She complied, pulling herself tight against me, which was a not-unpleasant situation. Next, I attempted something I’d been practicing. I leaned forward, turning the jets on my feet backward at an angle, then pushed my hand downward—not the one with the streambeam, but the one with the smaller handjet for maneuvering.

This kept us from toppling down into the water, the handjet giving thrust upward, the ones on my feet thrusting backward. The result was that we shot across the water, the jet on my hand lending us just enough lift to stay aloft. Twenty-seven and a half times in fifty-four, this stunt ended with me crashing face-first into the water. This time, blessedly, I managed it without such indignity.

Wind whipped at my face, the spray of water cold on my skin. I grinned, flying us toward one of the rooftops. Once there, I gave us a burst from below and used the guiding jet on my hand to slow our momentum forward. We shot high into the air, and another spurt of water from my hand nudged us over the lip of the roof, where we landed.

I stood triumphantly, putting one arm around Megan, looking down to see if she was beaming at me in awe.

Instead her teeth were chattering. “So … cold …”

“But it was awesome, right?” I said.

She breathed out, letting go of me and stepping onto the roof. A few people gawked at us from beside a tent on the far side of the building. “Not particularly *stealthy*,” she noted. “But yes, awesome. And you can stop ogling me now.”

I tore my eyes away from the way her damp T-shirt, underneath her jacket, clung to her skin and bra. “Sorry.”

“No,” she said, pulling her jacket tight and doing the buttons, “it’s all right. I mean, I teased you for looking at other women. That implies I want you to look at *me* instead. So I shouldn’t get mad when you do.”

“Mmm …,” I said. “So you’re gorgeous *and* logical.”

She gave me a flat stare. I just shrugged.

“I’m still not sure this will work,” she said.

“You’re the one who came to see *me*,” I said. “And if you hadn’t

noticed, back in the base, that moment in my room … it seemed to be working pretty well then."

We stood, looking at one another, and I hated how awkward it suddenly felt. As if a fat man at the buffet had suddenly forced his way between us to get at the mac and cheese.

"I should be going," she said. "Thank you. For being willing to talk. For not turning me in. For … being you."

"I'm pretty good at being me," I said. "I've had all these years to practice—I hardly ever get it wrong these days."

We stared at each other.

"So, uh," I said, shuffling from one foot to the other, "want to go with me to check up on Obliteration? If you're not doing anything else important, I mean."

She cocked her head. "Did you just invite me on a date … to spy on a deadly Epic planning to destroy the city?"

"Well, I don't have a lot of experience with dating, but I've always heard you're supposed to pick something you know the girl will enjoy.…"

She smiled. "Well, let's get to it then."

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I pulled out my mobile for a map of the area and Megan looked over my shoulder and pointed to the south. “That way,” she said. “We’ve got a walk ahead of us.”

“You sure you don’t want to …” I gestured at the spyril on my legs.

“What part of ‘spying’ involves flying through the city and drawing the attention of everyone nearby?”

“The fun part,” I said, sullen. I’d practiced for a reason. I wanted to show off what I knew.

“Well,” Megan said, “it might not matter, but I’d rather be quiet about this. Yes, Regalia wanted me to seduce you, but I don’t want to be blatant—”

“Wait, what?” I stopped in place.

“Oh, um, yeah.” Megan grimaced. “Sorry. I meant my explanation to be way better.” She ran her hand through her hair. “Regalia wanted me to seduce you. I’m not sure how much she knows of my background with the Reckoners, and I think she came up with the idea of me and you on her own. But don’t worry; I decided before even coming here that I wasn’t going to actively work against the Reckoners.”

I stared at her. That was kind of a large bomb to drop on me, just like that. I knew it was stupid, but suddenly I found myself questioning the affection she’d shown me earlier.

She wouldn’t have just told you if she were really planning on doing it, I told myself pointedly. I’d already decided to trust Megan. I’d just have to do it on this issue too.

“Well,” I said, starting off and giving her a smile, “that’s good. Even if being seduced kind of sounds like it would be fun.”

“Slontze,” Megan said, visibly relaxing. She took my arm and steered me across the rooftop. “At least if we’re spotted, I think Regalia will assume I’m just trying to do as she said.”

“And if something goes wrong,” I noted, “we can use your illusions to distract her.”

Megan shot me a glance as we reached a narrow rope bridge to the next roof. She started across in front of me, presenting a fine silhouette. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to use my powers,” she said softly.

“You aren’t.”

“I sense a very large *but*.”

“Funny, because right in front of me, I see a—”

“Watch it.”

“—very attractive, um, set of calves. Look, Megan, I know I told you not to use your powers. But that was just a first step, a way to reset and gain control. It’s not going to work long-term.”

“I know,” she said. “There’s no way I’ll be able to resist.”

“I’m not just talking about that,” I said. “I’m talking about something bigger.”

She stopped on the bridge and looked back at me. We swung gently above the waters below, some four stories down in this case. I wasn’t worried about the drop—I was still wearing the spyril.

“Bigger?” she asked.

“We can’t fight the Epics.”

“But—”

“Not alone,” I continued. “I’ve accepted it. The Reckoners only survive because of Prof and because of things like the spyril. I spent years convincing myself that regular people could fight, and I still think we can. But we need the same weapons our enemies have.”

Megan inspected me in the darkness. The only light came from spraypaint on the ropes of the bridge. Finally, she stepped forward and picked at something around my neck. Abraham’s necklace, which I wore under the wetsuit. She pulled it out.

“I thought you said these people were idiots.”

“I said they were idealistic,” I clarified. “And they are. Heroes aren’t magically going to show up and save us. But maybe, with work, we can figure out how to … um … recruit a few of them.”

“Did I tell you why I came to Babilar?” she asked, still holding

the necklace by its small *S* pendant.

I shook my head.

"Word is," Megan said, "that Regalia can enhance an Epic's powers. Make them stronger, more versatile."

I nodded slowly. "So what she said to me the other day …"

"She didn't just make it up then. This is something she's been claiming, in certain circles, for at least a year now."

"Which explains why so many High Epics have come to Babilar," I said. "Mitosis, Sourcefield, Obliteration. She promised to increase their power in exchange for doing as she demanded."

"And if there's one thing most Epics want," Megan agreed, "it's more power. No matter how strong they already are."

I shifted, feeling the bridge rock beneath us. "So you …"

"I came," Megan said softly, "because I figured if she really can increase an Epic's powers, she might be able to take mine away. Make me normal again."

Silence hung between us like a dead wombat on a string.

"Megan …"

"A foolish dream," she said, dropping the necklace and turning from me. "As foolish as yours. You're as idealistic as Abraham, David." She continued across the bridge, leaving me.

I hurried to catch up. "Maybe," I said, taking her by the arm as we reached the other side. "But maybe not. Let's work together, Megan. You and me. Maybe what you need is a pressure valve of some sort. You use your powers a little here and there, in a controlled situation, to scratch the itch. That lets you practice restraining the emotions. Or maybe there's another trick, one we can discover together."

She moved to pull away, but I held on tight.

"Megan," I said, stepping around her and meeting her eyes. "Let's at least *try*."

"I …" She took a deep breath. "Sparks, you're hard to ignore."

I smiled.

Finally, she turned and pulled me toward an abandoned tent, really just a cloth propped up on one side by a pole mounted in the rooftop. "If we're going to do this, you have to understand," Megan said softly, "that my powers are not what they seem."

"The illusions?"

"Not exactly."

She squatted down in the shadows of the abandoned tent, and I

joined her, uncertain what we were hiding from. Likely she just wanted to be sheltered as she talked, not so out in the open. But there was something very hesitant about her.

"I …" She bit her lip. "I'm not an illusion Epic."

I frowned but didn't object.

"You haven't figured it out?" Megan asked. "That time back in Newcago in the elevator shaft, when you and I were close to being spotted by guards. They shined a flashlight right on us."

"Yeah. You made an illusion of darkness to hide us."

"And did you *see* any darkness?"

"Well, no." I frowned. "Does this have to do with the dowser?" It was the device—a real piece of technology, so far as I knew—that scanned a person and determined if they were an Epic or not. The Reckoners tested everyone in their team with some regularity. "I never *did* figure out how you fooled it. You could have created an illusion on the screen to cover the real result, but …"

"The dowser records its results," Megan finished for me.

"Yeah. If Tia or Prof ever looked back at its logs, they'd have noticed a positive identification of an Epic. I can't believe they never did that." I focused on Megan, her face lit softly by some glowing spraypaint beneath us. "What *are* you?"

Megan hesitated, then spread her hands to her sides, and suddenly her wet clothing was dry. It changed, in an eyeblink, from a jacket and fitted tee to a jacket and green blouse, then a dress, then rugged camouflage military gear. The changes came faster and faster, different outfits flickering over her figure, and then her *hair* started changing. Different styles, different colors. Skin tones soon joined the mix. She was Asian, she was pale with freckles, she had skin darker than Mizzy's.

She was using her powers. That put my hair on end, even though I *had* been the one to encourage her.

"With my powers," she said, a hundred different versions of her face passing in a few moments, "I can reach into, and touch, other realities."

"Other realities?"

"I once read a book," Megan continued, her flickering features and clothing finally returning to her normal self, wet jacket and all, "that claimed there were infinite worlds, infinite possibilities. That every decision made by any person in this world created a

new reality."

"That sounds bizarre."

"Says the man who just flew through a city using a device powered by the corpse of a dead Epic."

"Well, *research* derived from a dead Epic," I corrected.

"No," Megan said. "An actual corpse. The 'research' involves using bits of dead Epic and drawing their abilities forth. What did you think the motivator on that machine was?"

"Huh." Mizzy had said the motivators were each individual to the device. So … like, individual because they had a piece of a dead Epic in them? *Probably just the mitochondrial DNA*, I thought. The Reckoners harvested it from dead Epics, and used it as currency.… That was what made the motivator work. It made some sense. Creepy sense, at least.

"Anyway," Megan said, "we're not talking about motivators right now. We're talking about me."

"That happens to be one of my favorite topics," I said, though I felt jarred. If Megan's powers were what she said, it meant I'd been wrong. All those years, I'd been *certain* I knew what Firefight was, that I'd figured out a secret nobody else knew. So much for that.

"Best I can tell," Megan said, "I pull one of those other realms —those *not*-places of possibility never attained—into our own, and for a time skew this reality toward that one.

That night, in the elevator shaft, we weren't there."

"But—"

"And we were," Megan continued. "To those men looking for us, the shaft was empty. In the reality they inspected, you and I had never climbed up there. I presented for them another world."

"And the dowser?"

"I presented to it a world where there was no Epic for it to find." She took a deep breath. "Somewhere, there's a world—or maybe just a possibility of one—where I don't carry this burden. Where I'm just *me* again."

"And what about Firefight?" I asked. "The image you showed the world, the fire Epic?"

Megan hesitated, then raised her hand.

An Epic appeared in front of us. A tall, handsome man with clothing aflame and a face that seemed molten. Eyes that glowed, a fist that dripped trails of fire, like burning oil. I could actually

feel the heat, just faintly.

I glanced at Megan. She didn't seem to be losing control despite using her powers. When she spoke, it was her voice—the her I knew.

"If there's a world where I don't have powers," Megan said, looking at the imposing figure, "there is one where I have different powers. It's easier to summon forth some possibilities than it is to summon others. I don't know why. It isn't like this one is *similar* to our world. In it, I have a completely different power set, and beyond that …"

"You're a dude," I said, noticing the similarity of features.

"Yeah. Kind of disconcerting, you know?"

I shivered, looking over this burning Epic that could have been Megan's twin. I'd been *way* off about her abilities.

I stood up, meeting Firefight's gaze. "So you don't have to … like, swap places with him or anything? To bring him here, I mean?"

"No," she said. "I pull shadows from another world into this one. That warps reality around the shadow in strange ways, but it's all still just a shadow. I can bring him here, but I've never seen his world."

"Does he … know I'm here?" I asked, glancing at Megan.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I can get him to do what I want, mostly, but I think that's because my powers seek out a reality where he was already going to do what it is I want him to do.…"

I met those burning eyes, and they seemed to be able to see me. They seemed to know me. Firefight nodded his head to me, then vanished.

"I felt heat," I said, looking at Megan.

"That varies," she said. "Sometimes, when I swap in the other reality—splicing it into our own—it's shadowy and indistinct. Other times, it's *almost* real." She grimaced. "We're supposed to be hiding, aren't we? I shouldn't be going around summoning High Epics that glow in the night."

"I think that was awesome," I said softly.

I immediately regretted my words. These were powers Megan had *just said* she didn't want to have. They corrupted her, sought to destroy her. Complimenting her powers was sort of like complimenting someone with a broken leg on how white their bone was as it stuck from their skin.

But she didn't seem to mind. In fact, I could swear she blushed a little. "It's not much," she said. "Really, it's a lot of work for a simple effect. Surely you've read of Epics who could make illusions of whatever they want without having to pull some alternate reality out of their pocket."

"I suppose."

She crossed her arms, looking me over. "All right. We should do something about that outfit."

"What? You think a guy wandering around in a wetsuit with strange Epic-derived devices strapped to his limbs is suspicious?"

She didn't answer me, instead placing her hand on my shoulder. Jeans and a jacket—both almost exactly like ones I actually owned—faded into existence around me, covering up the wetsuit. The bottoms of the legs flared, wide enough to go around the spyril. I was pretty sure that wasn't fashionable, but what did I know about fashion? In Newcago, the rage was outfits based on old 1920s Chicago.

I poked at the clothes. They weren't real, though I *thought* I could feel them just faintly. Or, like, I felt a memory of them. Does that make any sense? Probably not.

She inspected me, raising a critical eyebrow.

"What?" I asked.

"Trying to decide if I should change your face to make it less likely you'll be spotted sneaking up on Obliteration."

"Uh … okay."

"There are side effects, though," she said. "When swapping someone's body, I'm always worried I'll end up swapping them out *completely* with the version from another reality."

"Have you done that before?"

"I don't know," she said, arms crossed. "I'm mostly convinced that every time I die, my 'reincarnation' is really just my powers summoning out of another dimension a version of myself that didn't die." She shivered visibly. "Anyway, let's leave you like you are. I wouldn't want to swap your face and get it stuck that way. I've gotten used to the one you have. Shall we move on?"

"Yeah," I said.

We left the abandoned half tent and continued walking toward where Obliteration had set up. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Little hungry," she said.

"That's not what I meant." I glanced over at her.

She sighed as we walked. “I’m irritable. Like I haven’t gotten enough sleep. I want to snap at anyone close by, but it should fade soon.” She shrugged. “It’s better this time than it has been in the past. I don’t know why—though, despite what it might seem, I’m not really that powerful.”

“You said something like that before.”

“Because it’s true. But … well, that might be an advantage. It’s why I can do these things and not turn immediately. It’s harder for the really powerful Epics. For me, the only time it gets *really* bad is when I reincarnate.”

We started across a bridge. “It feels odd,” I noted, “having an Epic to talk to about all this so frankly.”

“It feels odd,” she said, “having your stupid voice say so much about my secrets.” Then she grimaced. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. A pleasant stroll with Megan wouldn’t feel right if a few wry comments didn’t accompany us.”

“No, it’s *not* all right. That isn’t me, Knees. I’m not acerbic like that.”

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Okay,” she snapped, “maybe I am. But I’m not downright insulting. Or, at least, I don’t want to be. I hate this. It’s like I can feel myself slipping away.”

“How can I help?”

“Talking is good,” she said. She took a deep breath. “Tell me about your research.”

“It’s kind of nerdy.”

“I can handle nerdy.”

“Well … I found those connections between some Epics and their weaknesses, right? Turns out, there’s a step beyond that. But to investigate it I’ll need to kidnap some Epics.”

“You never think small, do you, Knees?”

“No, listen.” I stopped her. “This is a great idea. If I can capture some Epics, then use their weaknesses to prevent them from using their powers, I can find out how long it takes them to turn normal. I can interview them, tease out connections from their past that might indicate what creates weaknesses in the first place.”

“Or, you know, you could interview the perfectly willing Epic walking beside you.”

I coughed into my hand. “Well, um, this scheme may have

started because I was thinking about how to rescue you from your powers. I figured if I knew how long it took, and what was required to hold an Epic … You know. It might help you."

"Aw," she said. "That has to be the sweetest way someone has ever told me they were planning to kidnap and imprison me."

"I just—"

"No, it's okay," she said, actually taking my arm. "I understand the sentiment. Thank you."

I nodded, and we walked for a time. There was no urgency. Val would take hours on her mission, and Obliteration wasn't going anywhere. So it was okay to enjoy the night—well, enjoy it as much as was possible, all things considered.

Babilar was beautiful. I was growing to like the strange light of the spraypaint. After the dull, reflective grey of Newcago, so much color was mesmerizing. The Babilarans could paint whatever murals they wanted, from scrawled names along the side of one building we passed, to a beautiful and fanciful depiction of the universe on the top of another.

While I still wasn't comfortable with how relaxed people were here, I did have to admit that there was a certain appealing whimsy about them. Would it really be so bad if this were all there was to life? Tonight, as we passed them swimming or chatting or drumming and singing, I found the people annoyed me far less than they had before.

Perhaps it was the company. I had Megan on my arm, walking close beside me. We didn't say much, but didn't need to. I had her back, for the moment. I didn't know how long it would last, but in this place of vibrant colors I could be with Megan again. For that I was thankful.

We passed up onto a tall building, approaching the eastern side of town, where Obliteration waited. I turned our path toward a bridge leading to an even higher building. That would be a good spot to either place Tia's camera or scope out a better location.

"I'm worried that when I reincarnate, it's not really *me* that comes back," Megan said softly. "It's some other version of me. I worry when it happens that eventually, something will go wrong and that other person will mess things up. Things I don't want messed up." She looked at me.

"It's the real you," I said.

"But—"

“No, Megan. You can’t spend your life worrying about that. You said that the powers grab a version of you that didn’t die—everything else is the same. Just alive.”

“I don’t know that for certain.”

“You remember everything that happened to you except the time right before the death, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It means you’re still you. It’s true—I can sense that it is. You’re my Megan, not some other person.”

She grew silent, and I glanced at her, but she was grinning. “You know,” she said, “talking to you sometimes—it makes me wonder if *you’re* actually the one who can reshape reality.”

A thought occurred to me. “Could you swap Obliteration?” I asked. “Pull out a version of him without powers, or with a really obvious weakness, then stuff this one into another dimension somewhere?”

She shook her head. “I’m not powerful enough,” she said. “The only times I’ve done anything *truly* dramatic are right after I die, on the morning when I reincarnate. Those times … it’s like I can pull bits of that reality with me, since I just arrived from it. But I’m not myself enough then to really control it at those times either, so don’t get any ideas.”

“It was worth asking,” I said, then scratched my head. “Though, I suppose even if you could do it, we probably shouldn’t. I mean, what good is it to protect *this* Babilar if we let tons of other people die in *another* Babilar.” If the things she could do were even from other worlds that did exist, rather than just possibilities of worlds that could have existed.

Man. Thinking about this was giving me a headache.

“The goal is still to get *rid* of my powers, remember,” Megan said. “Regalia claimed to be uncertain she could achieve it, but she told me that if I served her, she would see.” Megan walked for a time, thoughtful. “I don’t know if she was lying or not, but I think you’re right. I think there has to be something behind all this, a purpose.”

I stopped on the lip of the rooftop, looking at her standing on the edge of the bridge just behind me. “Megan, do you know your weakness?”

“Yes,” she said softly, turning to look out over the city.

“Does it have some kind of connection to your past?”

“Just random coincidences,” Megan said. She turned and met my eyes. “But maybe they aren’t as random as I thought.”

I smiled. Then I turned and continued across the rooftop.

“You’re not going to ask what the weakness is?” she said, hurrying up behind me.

“No. It belongs to you, Megan. Asking you for that … it’d be like asking someone for the key to their soul. I don’t want to put you in that position. It’s enough to know that I’m on the right course.”

I continued on, but she didn’t follow. I glanced back at her and found her staring at me. She hurried up in a sudden motion and placed her hand on my back as she passed, letting her fingers trail around my side. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Then she took the lead, hurrying across the top of the roof to where our vantage waited.

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OBLITERATION was still perched in the same place, though he glowed more powerfully now; in the night, he was so bright that it was getting tough to pick out his features. This particular rooftop was high enough to get a vantage on him but was still quite distant—only the powerful zoom on my scope let me get a good look. I'd have to move closer to plant the camera.

I zoomed out a step and found that one of the readouts on the side of my holosight was a light meter. "You getting this, Tia?" I asked over the mobile. Megan sat beside me silently, now that I had an open line to the Reckoners. The only video being recorded came from my scope, so I figured we should be safe.

"I can see him," Tia said. "That's in line with what I expected—if he follows the pattern from before, we still have a few more days until detonation."

"All right then," I said. "I'll plant the camera and make my way back to the pickup."

"Be careful," Tia said. "The camera will need to be pretty close to be effective. You want support?"

"Nah," I said. "I'll call in if I need anything."

"Okay then," Tia said, though she sounded hesitant. I hung up, deactivated the wireless link to my scope, and pocketed the mobile. I raised an eyebrow at Megan.

"They have this place under guard," she said softly. "The bridges have all been cut, and Newton frequently runs patrols. Regalia doesn't want anyone wandering close."

"Nothing we can't handle," I said.

"I didn't say we couldn't," Megan said. "I'm just worried about you improvising."

“I’d assumed all your complaints about my improvisation back in Newcago were because you didn’t want us to actually kill Steelheart.”

“In part,” she said. “But I still don’t like the way you run crazy all the time.”

I grunted.

“We need to talk about Steelheart, by the way,” Megan said. “You shouldn’t have done what you did.”

“He was a tyrant,” I said, using the scope to check out buildings near Obliteration, scouting out a good place for the camera. I lingered on the gaping block of water where the building had been burned down. Charred beams and bits of other rubble jutted from the ocean like the broken teeth of a giant submerged boxer with his mouth open and head tipped back.

Megan didn’t reply, so I glanced at her.

“I feel sorry for them, David,” she said softly. “I know what it feels like; that could have been me the Reckoners executed. Steelheart was a tyrant, but at least he ran a good city. All things considered, he wasn’t so bad, you know?”

“He killed my father,” I said. “You don’t get a pass on murder because you’re not as bad as you could be.”

“I suppose.”

“Do you have this hang-up regarding Regalia?”

Megan shook her head. “I feel bad for her, but she’s planning to let Obliteration vaporize the city. She has to be stopped.”

I grunted in agreement. I just wished I could shake the feeling that despite our precautions, Regalia was a step ahead of us. I handed the rifle to Megan. “Spot for me?” I asked.

She nodded, taking it.

“I’m going to go for that building just beyond the one they burned down. It’s high enough that if I put the camera on the lip just below the roof, it should have a clear line of sight.” I fished out the box Tia had given me, a waterproof housing with the small camera inside. I put in my earpiece, then attuned my mobile to a private frequency matching Megan’s so we could talk without using the Reckoners’ common frequency.

“David,” Megan said. She pulled her P226 out of the holster on her leg and offered it to me. “For luck. Just don’t drop the thing in the ocean.”

I smiled and took the gun, then jumped off the building.

There was certainly something liberating about the spyril. Jets of water slowed me until I touched down, softly, into the water. From there, not wanting to draw attention, I used the jets under the water to zip me through the streets.

About two streets away I noticed that my dimensional clothing —man, that sounded cool—vanished. I was left in just the wetsuit again. It looked like Megan's powers only worked at very close range. That fit with what I'd discovered years ago, when I'd figured out that a shadowy figure was always nearby when "Firefight" was seen in Newcago. Megan had needed to stay near to maintain the crossover.

When I reached the building I looked upward. I'd need to go up some ten stories to get into a position where the camera could see Obliteration. The spyril might be able to get me there, but I was close enough to Obliteration now that if I hovered up that high, someone was sure to spot me.

I took a breath and let the spyril lift me up one story, then I pulled my way into the building through a broken window. "I'm going to climb up through the building," I said softly to Megan. "Have you spotted any of Regalia's watchers?"

"No," Megan said. "They're probably in the buildings too. I'm searching windows."

I took off the spyril gloves and clipped them to my belt, then stepped into the humid, overgrown innards of the building. Most of the fruit had been harvested but there was still enough of it to see by. I managed to climb out of the orchard over the root systems and find a hallway, then I prowled down it.

I passed an old elevator shaft where the doors had been broken open by tree branches, and I kept going until I located the stairwell. I forced the door open to find a twisting stairwell overgrown with roots and vines. It looked like the plants all sent runners into shafts like this one, seeking the water below.

I turned on my mobile's light, careful to keep it dim. I didn't want anyone spotting a moving light through one of the windows, but with all this foliage blocking the view, I figured I should be okay inside the stairwell. I started to climb the steps, making it up the first flight without difficulty.

"This is a *nice* gun," Megan said in my ear as I started up the second flight. "Light readings, wind projections … Both active infrared *and* thermal? A control for remote firing? Ooh, recoil

reduction gravatonics! Can I keep this?"

"I thought you liked handguns," I said, reaching a section of broken steps. I looked up, then jumped and grabbed a root, which I scaled with some difficulty.

"A girl has to be flexible," Megan said. "Up close and personal is my style, but sometimes, somebody needs to be shot from a distance." She paused. "I think I just spotted a lookout in the building next to yours. I can't get a straight sight. I'm going to reposition."

"Any birds?" I asked, grunting as I climbed.

"Birds?"

"It's a hunch. Before you move, see if there are any pigeons on rooftops nearby."

"Okay …"

I managed to climb the system of roots up to the next landing, then I swung off and landed on the steps. The next flight was easy.

"Huh," Megan said. "Look at that. There *is* a pigeon on that rooftop there, all by itself, in the middle of the night."

"One of Newton's cronies," I said. "Knoxx, an Epic with shapeshifting powers."

"Knoxx? I've met that guy. He's not an Epic."

"We didn't think he was either," I said. "He revealed the abilities for the first time a few days back."

"Sparks! You think …?"

"Maybe," I said. "My notes listed Obliteration's teleportation power needing a cooldown time, but he doesn't seem to have that limitation anymore. Now this Knoxx guy. Something's going on, even if it's just some strange plot where Regalia is pretending to have abilities she doesn't."

"Yeah," Megan said. "You there yet?"

"Working on it," I said, rounding another flight of steps. "This is kind of a lot of work."

"Whine whine," Megan said.

"Says the woman watching comfortably from—"

"Wait! David, Prof is here."

I froze in the stairwell beside a faded number fifteen painted on the concrete wall. "*What?*"

"I've been scanning windows," Megan said. "David, Prof is sitting in one. I'm zoomed in on him now."

“Sparks.” Well, he *had* said he’d come back to the city tonight. “What’s he doing?”

“Watching Obliteration,” Megan said softly, the tension bleeding from her voice. “He’s not here for us. He doesn’t seem to have spotted me.”

“He’s checking in on Obliteration,” I said. “You know that building that collapsed out here?”

“Yeah.” Megan sounded sick. “I couldn’t stop it, David. I—”

“You didn’t need to. Prof saved the people.”

“With his powers?”

“Yeah.”

Megan was silent on the line for a while. “He’s powerful, isn’t he?”

“Very,” I said, excited. “*Two* defensive abilities, either of which would categorize him as a High Epic. Do you know how unusual that is? Even Steelheart only had the one defensive power, his impenetrable skin. You should have seen Prof when he saved us back in Newcago.”

“In the tunnels?” Megan asked. “When I …?”

“Yeah.”

“My fail-safe transmission didn’t capture that,” she said. “Only you talking.”

“It was incredible, believe me,” I said, still excited. “I’ve never read about an Epic like Prof and his ability to vaporize solids. Plus, his forcefields—they’re class A for sure. He made an enormous tunnel under the water and—”

“David,” Megan said, “the more powerful an Epic, the harder it is for them to resist the … changes.”

“Which is exactly why this is so exciting,” I said. “Don’t you see, Megan? If someone like Prof can remain good, it means so much. It’s a symbol, maybe even a bigger one than killing Steelheart! It proves that Regalia and the others could fight it off too.”

“I suppose,” Megan said hesitantly. “I just don’t like him being here. If he sees me …”

“You didn’t betray us,” I said as I climbed over a large section of roots. “Not really.”

“I … kinda did,” Megan said. “And even if I didn’t, there are other issues.”

“You mean Sam?” I said. “I’ve explained that you didn’t kill

him. I think I nearly have them convinced. Anyway, I'm almost to the top. Where is that pigeon?"

"Building directly south of you. So long as you're quiet, you should be safe."

"Good," I said, catching my breath as I reached floor number eighteen. I'd started on floor ten, and there were twenty in this building. Two more and I could place the camera and be gone.

"David," Megan said, "you really believe this, don't you? That we can fight it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Fire," Megan said softly.

I stopped on the stairwell. "On what?" I asked.

"It's my weakness."

I grew cold.

"Firefight," she explained, "is my opposite. Male where I am female. In that universe, everything is reversed. Here, fire affects my powers. There, fire *is* my power. Using him as my cover was perfect; nobody would use fire to try to kill me if they thought my own powers were fire-based, right? But by the light of natural fire, the shadows I summon break apart and vanish. I know, somehow, that if I die in a fire I won't reincarnate."

"We burned your body," I whispered. "Back in Newcago."

"Oh *sparks*, don't tell me things like that." I felt as if I could hear a shiver in her voice. "I was already dead. The body was just a husk. I always had Steelheart's people bury my bodies after I died, but I could never watch it. Seeing your own corpse is kind of a trip, you know?"

I waited on the steps. A few pieces of fruit dangled here, lighting the stairwell in a gentle glow.

"So why doesn't Firefight vanish?" I asked. "He's made of fire, which should negate your powers, and then he would go away."

"He's just a shadow," Megan said. "No real fire. That's what I've been able to figure. Either that or …"

"Or?"

"Or when I pull his shadow through, he brings with him some of the rules of his universe. I've had … experiences that make me question. I don't know how this works, David. Any of it. It frightens me sometimes. But fire *is* my weakness." She hesitated. "I wanted you to know what it was. In case … you know. Something needs to be done about me."

“Don’t say things like that.”

“I have to,” Megan whispered. “David, you *need* to know this. Our house burned down when I was just a kid. I was almost killed. I crawled through the smoke, holding on to my stuffed kitty, everything burning around me. They found me on the lawn, covered in soot. I have nightmares about that day. Repeatedly. All the time. If you do manage to interrogate other Epics, David … ask them what their nightmares are about.”

I nodded, then felt foolish because she couldn’t see that. I forced myself to start climbing again. “Thank you, Megan,” I whispered over the line. What she’d given me just then had taken a lot of guts to say.

She let out a breath. “Yeah, well, you’re never willing to just let things alone. You’ve got to find answers. So … well, maybe you’ll find this one.”

I reached the next flight of stairs, then twisted around the stairwell to keep going up. As I did, my foot trod on something that crunched.

I shivered and looked down. Another fortune cookie. I was tempted to just leave it there—the last ones had been seriously weird. Nobody in the base had been able to make sense of them. But I knew I couldn’t just leave it. I knelt down, anxious about making too much noise, and held up the slip of paper to the light of a glowing fruit.

Is this a dream? the paper asked.

I took a deep breath. Yeah. Still creepy. What did I do? Respond?

“No, it’s not,” I said.

“What?” Megan asked in my ear.

“Nothing.” I waited, uncertain what kind of response I expected. None came. I started up the stairwell again, watching my feet. Sure enough, I found another set of cookies growing from a vine on the next flight.

I popped one open.

Gnarly, it read. *I get confused sometimes*.

Was that a reply? “Who are you?”

“David?” Megan asked.

“I’m talking to fortune cookies.”

“You’re … Huh?”

“I’ll explain in a minute.”

I made my way upward slowly. This time I was able to catch a vine curling down, cookies sprouting from it like seeds. I waited for one to grow to full size in front of me, then pulled out the slip.

They call me Dawnslight. You're trying to stop her, right?

"Yes," I whispered. "Assuming you mean Regalia, I am. Do you know where she is?"

I broke open a few more cookies, but this pod all read the same thing, so I climbed up a little bit until I found another cluster.

Don't know, dude, it read. *I can't see her. I watched that other one, though. On the operating table*.

"Obliteration?" I asked. "On an *operating* table?"

Sure. Yeah. They cut something outta him. You're sure this isn't a dream?

"It's not."

I like dreams, the next cookie read.

I shivered. So Dawnslight was an Epic for certain. And this city was his.

"Where are you?" I asked.

Listen to that music….

That's the only response I got, no matter what questions I asked.

"David," Megan said on the line, worry bleeding into her voice, "you are seriously freaking me out right now."

"What do you know about Dawnslight?" I asked her, continuing upward at a slow pace in case any other cookies appeared.

"Not much," Megan said. "When I asked Regalia, she claimed that he was 'an ally' and implied that was all I needed to know. Is that who you were talking to?"

I looked at the slips of paper in my hand. "Yeah. Using a kind of bizarre Epic texting plan. I'll show you later." I needed to get this camera placed and move on. Fortunately, floor twenty was the final flight. I pushed on the door out of the stairwell, but it didn't budge. I grunted and shoved a little harder.

I winced as it opened with a loud creak. Beyond was an entryway accented by dark wood trim, with a very nice rug covering a marble floor, though that had been broken up by the plants.

"David, what did you just do?" Megan asked.

“Might have opened a door a little too loudly.”

“Well, the bird just looked your direction. Sparks! He’s flying toward the building. Hurry.”

I cursed softly, making my way through the room as quickly as possible. I passed an overgrown reception desk and pushed into the office beyond. The window here looked out right at Obliteration.

I climbed up on the windowsill.

“The bird just landed on a window on your building, one story down from you, but on the south side,” Megan said. “He must have heard you, but he wasn’t certain of the location.”

“Good,” I whispered, reaching out and affixing the camera on the outside of the building. This was the east side, so the bird shouldn’t see me. The camera stuck in place easily. “Obliteration?”

“Not looking your way,” Megan said. “He hasn’t noticed. But if that bird really *is* one of Newton’s Epics …”

If he is …

An idea started to form in my head. “Mmm …,” I said, tapping the camera to activate it.

“David?” Megan said. “What does that tone mean?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re improvising, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.” I ducked quietly back into the room. “Tell me, Megan. What is one surefire way to know if this Knoxx guy has been hiding his powers all along, or if Regalia—either through trickery or some other means—gave him his abilities?”

She was silent for a moment. “Sparks. You want to kidnap him, don’t you?”

“Well, Val isn’t going to be back for another hour at least. Might as well do something useful with my time.” I paused. “I’m really itching to see if that guy has had any nightmares lately.”

“And if Prof or Obliteration notices what you’re doing?”

“It won’t come to that,” I said.

“Slontze,” Megan said.

“Guilty as charged. Can you get into position to cover me through some of the windows?”

Megan sighed. “Let me see.”

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THIS, I thought as I crossed back through the swanky overgrown office, *is crazy*.

Moving against an Epic I barely knew? One about which I had no research, no notes, no intel at all? It was like jumping into a swimming pool without first looking to see if your friends had filled it with snakes.

I had to do it anyway.

We were blind; Regalia had us all running. Prof had been unresponsive for a day, during our most difficult stages of planning—but worse, even if he helped, Regalia was probably manipulating us based on her knowledge of him and Tia.

I needed to do something unexpected, and the secrets Knoxx knew could make a huge difference. I consoled myself with the idea that at least I wasn't trying to take on Obliteration or Newton on my own. This was just a minor Epic, after all.

I wasn't certain what Prof's reaction would be. I'd told him my plan about kidnapping an Epic—and he'd said that either I was just what the Reckoners needed, or I was dangerously reckless. Maybe I was both.

But he hadn't *specifically* forbidden me to try it. He just hadn't wanted me endangering the team. This wouldn't do that.

I peeked back into the stairwell. What I needed to do was make more noise so that Knoxx would figure out he'd gotten the wrong location. When he came up to check on me, I could clock him. Easy as pie.

Not that I actually knew how to make pie.

I stamped on the floor and knocked an old desk lamp off a side table, then I cursed as if I'd bumped into it. After that I moved

back to the stairwell and held Megan's gun up, two-handed and at high ready, mobile darkened so that the only light was the moonlike glow of the plump fruit drooping from branches.

I waited, tense, and just listened. Indeed, I heard something in the stairwell. It echoed, a scraping that sounded far distant down below. Or was it coming from the floor right below me? With the strange echoing, it was difficult to tell.

"He's moving in." I jumped at Megan's voice. Though I'd turned the receiver way down, it seemed like thunder in my ear. "He entered the window and is on the floor just beneath you."

"Good," I said softly.

"There's movement on the first floor too," she said. "Well, the first floor above the water level, anyway. David, I think someone *else* is in that building."

"Scavengers?"

"I can't get a visual. Sparks. I'm having trouble getting any sort of clear look into your location too. It's too overgrown. I've lost Knoxx. Maybe you should flush him out."

"I'd like to avoid gunfire if possible," I said. "Who knows what kind of attention that will bring?"

"Does this rifle have a built-in suppressor?" Megan asked.

"Uh …" Did it?

"Yup, here it is," Megan said. "Electron-compressed muzzle suppressor. Sparks, this gun is *nice*."

I felt a stab of jealousy, which was utterly stupid. It was just a gun. And it wasn't even as good a gun as my last one. I immediately felt ashamed for thinking ill of the gun—which was even *more* stupid.

I listened at the stairwell, trying to pick out sounds of someone sneaking up. I heard something, but it came from *behind* me, inside the room where I'd planted the camera.

I stifled a curse. Knoxx had somehow circled around and come in the window of the executive office. My first instinct was to run toward him, but I pressed that down and instead eased open the door to the stairwell and slipped through.

Not a moment too soon. As I watched through the cracked stairwell door, the door into the executive office inched open and a figure emerged into the light of the hanging fruit in the receptionist's entryway. Knoxx. Slender, with buzzed hair and about forty earrings. He wore a mobile on his shoulder and

carried a sleek-looking Beretta compact in two hands. He checked his corners, then inched into the room.

"Whoever it was," he whispered, "they were in here."

I couldn't hear the reply; he had in an earpiece.

"You're such an idiot, Newton," he said, kneeling to inspect the lamp I'd knocked over. "It's probably just some kids looking for food that nobody else has touched."

I frowned, surprised that a High Epic let a man like this talk to her that way. He must be more powerful than I'd assumed.

Knoxx stood and moved toward the stairwell. Again a noise echoed up from down below, and the man hesitated. "I heard something," he said, moving forward less carefully. "From the stairwell, far below. They're running, it seems.… Yes …" He reached the door to the stairwell. "Okay, I'll check it out. We—"

I kicked the door open into his face.

Knoxx's voice cut off midsentence. I jumped into the room and buried my fist into his stomach, making him drop his gun. I carried Megan's handgun in my off hand, and brought it down, hoping to smack it against the back of Knoxx's head.

He managed to throw himself to the side and I missed, but I immediately lunged and grabbed him around the neck. Abraham had taught me a few grappling moves. If I could choke him, make him pass out …

Knoxx vanished.

Right. Transformation powers.

Idiot, I thought as the pigeon fluttered away from me. Fortunately, they weren't the most agile of birds. While the pigeon tried to get its bearings, I ran for the door that led to the executive office—the one with the window. I slammed that door, trapping the pigeon in our smaller chamber.

It fled down into the stairwell.

"David?" Megan asked in my ear.

"He got away from me," I said. "But he dropped his gun, and I kept him from getting out of the building. He's in the stairwell somewhere."

"Be careful," she said, tense.

"I will be," I said, peeking into the stairwell. I couldn't be certain he was unarmed—lots of men carried two guns, and it seemed any clothing and weapons he had on him vanished when he transformed, reappearing when he became a human again.

That was pretty standard for shifters of moderate power.

I thought I heard a flutter of wings, and decided to follow it down the stairs. Unfortunately, this meant I could be running into a trap like the very one I'd just set for him.

"Do you see anything?" I asked.

"Watching …," Megan said. "Yes! The floor below the top floor has shadows moving in the fruit lights. He's making a run for it. Want me to send him ducking?"

"Yes please," I said, pressing my back to the concrete wall.

I heard a few shots over the line. A suppressor, even a modern one, didn't completely eliminate the sound of gunfire—but they worked marvels nonetheless. Any spark from her shots would be hidden, which was important at night like this, and the gunfire didn't sound much like gunfire. More like metallic clicks.

There was a cracking of glass from the room nearby. Megan wasn't trying to hit the Epic; her shots just needed to make him more worried about her than he was about me. I thought I heard a man curse in the next room.

"Going in," I said. I leaped off a tree trunk and pulled open the swinging door, then ducked down in a crouch, searching for my mark. I heard heavy breathing, but could see nothing. It was a big room, a kind of large office space with broken cubicles and old computers. As I crept forward I passed a few of those cubicles that had been capped by canvas, making little dwellings filled with discarded pots and the occasional other refuse of human habitation. All were abandoned.

Megan had fired in through the large series of windows on the wall opposite me. Dust floated in the air, lit by fruit that dangled from the ceiling like snot from the nose of a toddler who had been snorting glowsticks.

How would I find Knoxx in this room? He could hide practically forever if he turned into a bird. I'd never—

Something launched out of the cubicle beside me, a black form with fur and claws. I yelped, firing out of instinct, but my aim was off. The thing hit me hard, knocking me back, and Megan's gun thumped against the floor. I struggled, trying to throw the creature off. It wasn't as big as I was, but those claws! They raked me along the side, which burned something fierce.

I flailed, one hand forcing the beast back, the other reaching for my gun. I didn't find it, but instead gripped something cold

and metal from inside the covered cubicle beside us. I raised it and slammed it into the side of the beast's head.

A can of spraypaint?

As the beast turned back at me I sprayed it in the face, covering the thing's snout in glowing blue paint. The light let me pick out that the creature was a dog, though I didn't know my breeds. It was lean, with short hair and a pointed face.

It scrambled back, then the edges of its form fuzzed and the dog became a man. He stood, wiping paint from his eyes.

"Help!" I shouted. "You have a shot?"

"Maybe," Megan said. "I thought you wanted him alive, though!"

"I want *me* alive more," I said. "Take the shot!"

Knoxx reached the gun I'd dropped.

Something shattered one of the windows, and Knoxx lurched to the side as Megan's bullet took him in the shoulder. A spray of dark blood painted the wall behind him.

Knoxx slumped down, looking dazed, his face still glowing with blue paint. He groaned and dropped the handgun, then became a pigeon and fluttered away, crookedly.

"Did I get him?" Megan said in my ear.

"Right in the shoulder," I said, breathing out a tense breath. "Thank you."

"I'm just glad I didn't shoot you," Megan said. "I was aiming through infrared."

I groaned, climbing to my feet, hand to my side where Knoxx's claws had caught me. I was alive, but I'd failed to capture him. Still, I should probably count myself lucky.

A flutter of wings sounded from the other side of the room.

I frowned, picking up Megan's gun and inching forward. By the light of drooping fruit I saw spots of dark liquid on the desk nearby. I followed them to where the pigeon crouched on a windowsill, face glowing blue.

It's wounded, I realized. *It can't fly*.

The pigeon saw me and leaped out the window, fluttering awkwardly, losing feathers as it struggled to stay aloft. It barely made it to the next building over before being forced to land.

So it could fly, but not well. I looked down at my side. The clawing hurt, but didn't seem life-threatening. I looked out the window again, then put away the gun and shoved my hands into

the gloves clipped to my belt. I raised them, then checked the legjets as the spyril warmed up.

"I'm going after him," I said.

"You're—"

I lost the rest of Megan's words as I jumped out the window. Twin jets of water lifted me from below before I hit the ocean, and I bobbed back up into the air, one hand down—streambeam pointed into the water. I spun for a moment, orienting myself.

Just ahead, the pigeon—still glowing blue across the face and neck—leaped off its perch and tried to flee. I grinned and sprayed the handjet behind me, tipping myself forward so my legs shot water downward and back at an angle.

I was off, wind blowing against my face as I tailed the weakened bird. It moved in a sudden, desperate burst of speed, keeping ahead of me despite its wound. I jetted after it, turning a corner by twisting and thrusting my legs to the side like a skier, then resetting and pointing the new direction.

Ahead, the bird landed on the windowsill of a building to rest. As soon as I got close, it lurched into the air again, fluttering and flapping, a glowing bob of blue.

I roared after it, and realized I was grinning. Ever since I'd started practicing with the spyril, I'd wanted to try something like this. A real test of my skills, fledgling though they were.

The bird, frantic, ducked into a building through a small gap in a broken window. I jetted up behind and used a spray of water from my handjet to shatter the window further, then I followed with my shoulder, breaking into the room. I managed to land without falling on my face—barely—and charged after the blue animal. It darted out another window, and I broke through, leaping into the air again.

"David?" I could barely hear Megan's voice. "Were those windows? Sparks, what is going *on*?"

I smiled, too focused to give a report. My chase wound through the waterway streets of Babilar, passing people on rooftops who pointed and cried out. The bird tried to fly high at one point, but the strain was too much and it came back down to land on a rooftop. *Yes*, I thought. *This is it.* I jetted up onto the roof and landed near it.

As I got my balance, the bird's form fuzzed and reshaped into a man. Knoxx's face was pale where it wasn't blue, and blood

covered his shoulder. He stumbled back from me, clutching one hand to his shoulder, pulling out a knife with the other.

I stopped and stared at him for a moment, waiting. Then, finally, he toppled over, unconscious.

"I've got him," I said, staying back in case he was faking. "At least, I think I do."

"Where are you?" Megan asked.

I looked around, trying to orient myself after my frenzied chase. We'd curved through the streets and come back around to near where we'd begun.

"Two streets over from the building where I placed the camera. Look for a rooftop about four stories above the ocean, sparsely populated, a big mural of some people picking fruit spraypainted on the top."

"Coming," Megan said.

I unstrapped my gloves, then took Megan's gun from my pocket. I didn't want to get any closer to Knoxx without backup, but with that wound, would he bleed out on me if I didn't do something? There was too much to lose, I decided. I needed this man alive. I inched forward and finally decided that either he was a really good faker, or he actually was unconscious. I bound his hands as best I could using his own shoelaces, then tried to bandage his wound with his jacket.

"Megan?" I asked over the line. "ETA?"

"Sorry," she said. "No bridges. I'm having to weave all the way around to get to you. It's going to be another fifteen minutes or so."

"All right."

I settled down to wait, letting my tension melt away. It was replaced by a realization of the full foolishness of what I'd just done. I'd obviously underestimated Knoxx's transformation powers—he could turn into more than just a bird. What if he'd been even more powerful than that? What if he'd been a High Epic, impervious to bullets?

Prof had called me reckless, and he was right. While I should have felt triumphant in what I'd done, I found myself embarrassed. How would I explain this to the other Reckoners? Sparks. I hadn't even called Tia.

Well, at least it had turned out okay.

"Listen carefully," a voice said from behind me. "You're going

to drop the gun. Then you're going to put your hands into the air, palms facing forward, and turn around."

A jolt of fear washed through me. But I recognized that voice. "Val?" I said, looking back.

"Drop the gun!" she ordered. She'd come out through the stairwell that connected the top floor of this building to the rooftop. She had a rifle tucked into her shoulder, sights on me.

"Val," I said. "Why are you—"

"*Drop it.*"

I dropped Megan's gun.

"Stand."

I obeyed, my hands out to the sides.

"Now your mobile."

Sparks. I ripped it off my shoulder and laid it on the ground, just as Megan said in my ear, "David? What's happening?"

"Kick it forward," Val instructed. When I hesitated, she focused her sights right on my forehead. So I kicked the mobile toward her.

She knelt, gun still on me, and picked it up with one hand.

"Sparks, David," Megan said in my ear. "I'm hurrying as fast as __"

She cut off as Val ended the signal, then slipped my mobile into her pocket.

"Val?" I asked as calmly as I could. "What's wrong?"

"How long have you been working for Regalia?" she replied. "Since the beginning? Was she the one who sent you to Newcago to infiltrate the Reckoners?"

"Working for … What? I'm not a spy!"

Val swung the rifle and actually fired, planting a bullet at my feet. I yelped, jumping back.

"I know you've been meeting with Firefight," Val said.

Sparks.

"You've been suspicious since you got here," Val continued. "You didn't save those people in the burning building, did you? It was a plot by you and Regalia to 'prove' how trustworthy you were. Did you even really kill Steelheart? You really didn't think anyone would notice when you helped Firefight enter our base? Calamity!"

"Val, listen. It's not what you think it is." I stepped forward.

And she shot me.

Right in the thigh. Pain tore through me and I dropped to my knees. I wrapped my hands around the wound, cursing. “Val, you’re crazy! I’m not working for them. Look, I just captured an Epic!”

Val glanced at Knoxx lying bound on the ground. Then she swung her rifle toward him and shot him square in the head.

I gasped, growing numb despite the pain. “What …,” I sputtered. “After all I just did to—”

“The only good Epic is a dead Epic,” Val said, sights back on me. “As a Reckoner, you should know this. But you’re not one of us. You never were.” She growled that last part, and her hand tightened on her weapon, her eyes narrowing. “You’re the reason Sam is dead, aren’t you? You gave them intel on us, on all the Reckoner cells.”

“No, Val,” I said. “I swear it! We’ve been lying to you, yes, but on Prof’s orders.” Blood dripped between my fingers as I squeezed my leg. “Let’s call Tia, Val. Don’t do anything rash.” *Anything* else *rash*.

Val kept the sights right on me. I met her gaze.

Then she pulled the trigger.

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I tried to dodge, of course, but there was no chance I could get out of the way quickly enough. Beyond that, I was worn out and had just been shot in the leg.

So, when I came out of my awkward roll, I was surprised to find myself still alive. Val was surprised too, judging by her expression, but that didn't stop her from shooting me again.

The bullet stopped at my chest, implanting itself into my wetsuit but not breaking skin. Little spiderweb cracks of light spread out from it, then quickly faded.

Though I was glad to be alive, dread washed over me. I knew that effect—Prof's forcefields sometimes looked like that when they absorbed a blow. I looked up and found him, a silhouette in the night, standing on the single bridge leading to this rooftop. It swung slowly back and forth in the darkness.

Prof wasn't lit at all. He was a brick of blackness, lab coat fluttering in the lethargic breeze.

"Stand down, Valentine," Prof said softly, drawing her attention.

Val turned to look, then visibly jumped. She obviously hadn't figured out how I'd survived—but of course, she didn't know that Prof was an Epic. To her the forcefields were a product of advanced Epic technology.

Prof stepped onto the rooftop, the glow of the mural beneath lighting his face. "I gave you an order," he said to Val. "Stand down."

"Sir," she said. "He's been—"

"I know," Prof said.

Uh-oh, I thought, sweating. I started to rise, but a glare from

Prof made me flop back down. The pain in my leg flared up again, and I pressed my hand back against the wound. Odd how in a moment of panic, I'd completely forgotten that I'd been shot.

I *hate* getting shot.

"His mobile," Prof said, holding out his hand to Val. She produced it, and Prof typed something in. I had the screen set to lock with a passcode the moment it was turned off—so he shouldn't have been able to get it back on. But he did.

"Text the person he's been communicating with," Prof said to Val. "That is Firefight. Say exactly this: 'Everything is all right. Val thought I was one of Regalia's men with Knoxx at first.' "

Val nodded, lowering the gun and sending a message to Megan.

Prof looked at me, crossing his arms.

"I …," I said. "Um …"

"I'm disappointed in you," Prof said.

Those words crushed me.

"She's not evil, Prof," I said. "If you'd just listen to me—"

"I *have* been listening," Prof said. "Tia?"

"I've got it, Jon," Tia answered, her voice coming in over my earpiece. "You can listen to the entire thing again here, if you want."

"You bugged my phone," I whispered. "You didn't trust me."

Prof raised an eyebrow at me. "I gave you two chances to come clean, the latest being just earlier this very night. I *wanted* to be wrong about you, boy."

"You *knew*?" Val asked, turning to Prof. "All along, you knew what he was doing?"

"I didn't get where I am without learning to read my men, Val," Prof said. "Has Firefight replied?"

Val looked down at the screen of my mobile. I lay back, sick to my stomach. They'd been listening in. They *knew*. Sparks!

"She says, 'Okay. You're sure everything's all right?' "

"Say yes," Prof told Val. "And say, 'You should stay away for now. Val called Prof over, and we're going to head back to base. I think I can explain things away to them. I'll let you know what we find out from this Epic.' "

As Val tapped on the phone, Prof walked over to me. He placed his hand on my leg and got out a little box, the thing he called the harmsway—his "technology" for healing others.

The pain in my leg went away. I looked at him and realized I

was having difficulty holding back tears. I didn't know if they were from shame, pain, or pure rage.

He'd been *spying* on me.

"Don't feel so bad, David," Prof said softly. "This is why you're here."

"*What?*"

"Firefight did exactly as we expected," Prof said. "If she was so good she could infiltrate my own team, I knew she'd have little difficulty compromising you. You're a good fighter, David. Passionate, determined. But you're inexperienced, and you melt for a pretty face."

"Megan's *not* just a pretty face."

"And yet you let her manipulate you," Prof said. "You let her into our base, and you told her our secrets."

"But I …" I *hadn't* let her into the base. She'd done that on her own. Prof didn't know everything, I realized. He'd bugged my mobile, but obviously that only gave him information when I had it on. He didn't know things Megan and I had talked about in person, only what we'd said over the line.

"I know you don't believe me, David," Prof said. "But everything she told you, everything she has done, has been part of a game. She played you. Her mock vulnerability, her supposed affection … I've seen it all before, son. All lies. I'm sorry. I'd bet even this 'weakness' she told you about is a fabrication."

Her weakness! Prof knew Megan's weakness. She'd told it to me over the mobile. He didn't believe, but he still knew. I felt a spike of alarm.

"You're wrong about her, Prof," I said, meeting his eyes. "I *know* she's being sincere."

"Oh?" Prof said. "And did she tell you about how she killed Sam?"

"She didn't. I—"

"She did," Prof said quietly, firmly. "David, we have it on film. Val showed it to me when I got to Babilar. Sam's mobile was recording as he died. Firefight shot him."

"You didn't tell me that!"

"I have my reasons," Prof said, standing up.

"You used me as bait," I said. "You said … this is why I'm here! You were planning a trap for her from the start!"

Prof turned to walk back to Val, who nodded at him, showing

him the screen of my mobile.

"Let's move," Prof said. "Where's the sub?"

"Down below," Val said. "I didn't plant the supplies. I tracked David instead. You should have told me."

"The plan required him to believe that we didn't know what he was doing," Prof said, taking my mobile and putting it into his pocket. "The fewer who knew, the better." He looked back at me. "Come on, son. Let's head back."

"What are you going to do?" I demanded, still sitting where I'd been shot, my blood a stain beneath me. "About Megan."

Prof's expression darkened, and he didn't reply.

From that, I knew. The Reckoners had used ploys like this before, luring an Epic into a trap with a series of false texts they thought were from an ally.

I had to warn Megan.

I turned and threw myself off the rooftop, engaging the spyril. Which didn't work. I had about enough time to let out a shout of surprise before I hit the water four stories down from the roof.

It did not feel pleasant.

Once I sputtered out of the water and grabbed the side of the building, I looked up. Prof stood on the edge of the roof, tossing something up and down in his hand. The spyril's motivator. When had he lifted that? When he was healing me, probably.

"Fish him out," he said to Val, loud enough that I could hear. "And let's get back to the base."

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I spent the next day in my room.

I wasn't confined there, not explicitly, but when I left, the looks I got from Val, Exel, and Mizzy drove me back into solitude.

Mizzy was the worst. At one point I stepped out to go to the bathroom and passed her working in the supply room. She looked at me and her smile faded. I could see anger and disgust in her eyes. She turned back to packing the supplies and didn't say a word.

And so, I spent the time lying on my bed, alternatingly ashamed and furious. Was I going to get kicked out of the Reckoners? The possibility made me sick. And what of Megan? The things Prof said … well, I didn't want to believe them. I *couldn't* believe them. At the very least, I didn't want to think about them.

Unfortunately, thinking about Prof made me furious. I had betrayed the team, but I couldn't help feeling that I'd been betrayed even more by him. I'd been *set up* to fail.

When the next morning came, I woke up to noises. Preparations. The plan moving forward. I stewed in my room for a time, but eventually I couldn't take it any longer. I needed answers. I pushed myself off the bed and went out to the hallway. I braced myself as I passed the storage room, but Mizzy wasn't there. I heard noises from the far end of the hallway behind me, in the room with the sub. That would be Val and her team packing for the mission.

I didn't go that way. I wanted Prof and Tia, and I found them in the meeting room with the glass wall. They looked up at me, then Tia glanced at Prof.

“I’ll talk to him,” Prof said to Tia. “Go join the others. We’ll be a man short on this mission, and I want you running operations from inside the sub. Our base is compromised. We won’t be returning here.”

Tia nodded, picking up her laptop, and walked out. She gave me a glance but nothing else as she shut the door. That left only me and Prof, lit by the lamp on Tia’s desk.

“You’re going on the mission,” I said. “The hit on Newton, to expose Regalia.”

“Yes.”

“A man short,” I said. “You’re not taking me?”

Prof didn’t say anything.

“You let me practice with the spyril,” I said. “You let me think I was part of the mission here. Was I really just bait *the whole time*?”

“Yes,” Prof said quietly.

“Is there more to the plan, then?” I demanded. “Things you haven’t told me? What’s really going on here, Prof?”

“We haven’t kept much from you,” he said with a quiet sigh. “Tia’s plan to find Regalia is legitimate, and it’s working. If we can get Regalia to appear in the region Tia wants, it will leave us with only a few buildings Regalia could be hiding in. I’m going to run point, execute the plan against Newton. Chase her through the city, tempt Abigail to appear. If she does, we’ll know her base location. Val, Exel, and Mizzy will move at Tia’s word and run an assault to kill her.”

“Sounds like you could use another point man,” I said.

“Too late for that,” Prof said. “I suspect it will take time for us to rebuild trust. On both sides.”

“And Obliteration?” I asked, stepping forward. “There’s been almost *no* talk about how to deal with him! He’s a bomb—he’s going to destroy the entire city.”

“We don’t need to worry about that,” Prof said. “Because we already have a way to stop Obliteration.”

“We do?”

Prof nodded.

I flogged my brain like a dog who had made a mess on the carpet, but I came up with nothing. How would we stop Obliteration? Was there something they hadn’t told me? I looked at Prof.

And then I saw it in his grim expression, his tightly drawn lips.

"A forcefield," I realized. "You enclose him in a bubble of it as he releases the destructive force."

Prof nodded.

"All that heat has to go somewhere," I said. "You'll just be bottling it up."

"I can expand the shield," he said, "projecting the heat away from the city. I've practiced it."

Wow. But, then, was this really anything more than he'd done in saving me from the blast that killed Steelheart? He was right. We'd had the answer to at least delaying Obliteration right here all along. The heat probably wouldn't kill Obliteration himself—he seemed immune to his own powers—but it would slow him. And who knew, maybe a focused and concentrated blast reflected back upon him *would* actually be able to destroy him. It was at least worth trying.

I walked forward, approaching Prof, who still sat at Tia's desk before the wall of dark water. Something brushed against it outside, something wet and slimy, but I lost sight of it in the blackness. I shivered, then looked back at Prof.

"You can do it, right?" I asked. "Hold it in? Not just the explosion, but … other things?"

"I'll have to." Prof stood up and walked to the glass wall, looking out at the dark waters. "Tia tells me that many Epics like Obliteration have a moment of weakness after they expend a large blast of energy. He might be vulnerable. If he survives the heat of his own blast, I might be able to bring him down right after while his powers are dampened. And if not, at least I can stop him long enough for it to matter—and for the other team members to deal with Regalia."

"And Megan?" I asked.

He didn't reply.

"Prof," I said. "Before you kill her, at least try out what she said. Light a fire. See if it destroys the images she creates. You'll have proof that she was telling me the truth."

Prof reached up and touched the glass of the window. He'd left his lab coat on the back of the chair and was wearing only a pair of slacks and a button-down shirt, both the same oddly antiquated style that he favored. I could almost imagine him out in the jungle with a machete and a map, exploring ancient ruins.

"You *can* control the darkness inside," I said to him. "And since you can do it, Megan can too. It—"

"Stop," Prof whispered.

"But listen, it—"

"Stop!" Prof yelled, spinning on me. His hand moved so fast I barely saw it before he grabbed me by the throat and hauled me into the air, turning and slamming me back against the large window.

I let out a *gurk*. The only illumination in the room was that lamp on the desk, backlighting Prof, hiding his face in shadows. I scrambled, choking, trying to pry his fingers free from my throat. Prof took me under the arm with his other hand and lifted me up, relieving some pressure on my throat. I was able to wheeze in a short breath.

Prof leaned against me, forcing more air out of my lungs, and spoke slowly. "I've tried to be patient with you. I've tried to tell myself your betrayal isn't personal, that you were seduced by an expert illusionist and con woman. But damn it, son, you're making it *very hard*. Even though I knew what you'd do, I hoped for better. I thought you, of all people, understood. We *can't trust them*!"

I struggled to wheeze something out, and he let me breathe a little more.

"Please … put me down …," I said.

He studied me for a moment in the dim light, then stepped back, letting me drop to the floor. I gasped for air, pushing myself up beside the wall, tears rolling from the corners of my eyes.

"You should have come to me," Prof said. "If you'd just come to me instead of hiding everything …"

I struggled to my feet. Sparks! Prof had a *grip*. Did his power portfolio include enhanced physical abilities? I might have to change the entire subset of Epic I'd categorized him under.

"Prof," I said, rubbing my neck, "something is very, very *wrong* about this city. And we're blind! Yes, your plan for Obliteration is a good one, but what is Regalia plotting? Who is Dawnslight? I didn't get a chance to tell you. He contacted me again, yesterday. He seems to be on our side, but there's something strange about him. He mentioned … surgery on Obliteration? What is Regalia planning? She has to know that we're going to try to kill some of her pet Epics. She seems to be encouraging it. Why?"

“Because of what I’ve been saying all along!” Prof said, throwing his hands into the air. “She’s *hoping* we’ll be able to stop her. For all I know, she brought Obliteration here so we could kill him.”

“If that’s true, it would imply an element of resistance inside of her,” I said, stepping forward. “It means she’s fighting back. Prof, is it so far a stretch to believe that she might be hoping you’ll be able to help her? Not kill her, but restore her to what she once was?”

Prof stood in the darkness, a hulking silhouette. Sparks, he was so *intimidating* when he chose to be. Broad-chested, square-faced —almost inhuman in his proportions. It was easy to forget how big he was; you start thinking of him as the manager, the leader of the team. Not as this figure of lines and muscles, cut of blackness and shadow.

“Do you realize how dangerous this talk of yours is?” he asked softly. “For me?”

“What?”

“Your talk of good Epics. It gets inside my brain, like maggots eating at the flesh, worming their way toward my core. I decided long ago—for my sanity, for the world itself—that I could not use my powers.”

I felt cold.

“But now, here you come. Talking about Firefight, and how she lived among us for months, using her powers only when necessary. It starts me wondering. I could do it too, couldn’t I? Aren’t I strong? Don’t I have a handle on it? When you left me yesterday, in the room by myself, I started creating forcefields again. Little ones, to bottle up chemicals, to glow and give me light. I keep finding excuses to use them, and now I’m planning to use my powers to stop Obliteration—create a shield bigger than any I’ve created in years.”

He stepped forward and grabbed me by the front of my shirt again. He yanked me close.

“*It’s not working,*” Prof hissed at me. “It’s destroying me, step by step. *You* are destroying me, David.”

“I …” I licked my lips.

“Yes,” Prof whispered, dropping me. “We tried this once. Me. Abigail. Lincoln. Amala. A team, just like in the movies, you know?”

"… And?"

He met my gaze in the gloom. "Lincoln went bad—you call him Murkwood these days. He always did love those sparking books. I had to kill Amala."

I swallowed.

"It doesn't work, David," Prof said. "It *can't* work. It's destroying me. And …" He took a deep breath. "It has already destroyed Megan. She texted this morning. She wants to meet with you again. So at least something good will come out of this."

"No!" I said. "You're not—"

"We'll do what we do, David," Prof said quietly. "There will be a reckoning."

I felt a mounting horror. I had an image of Sourcefield powerless in the deluge of Kool-Aid, struggling with the bathroom door, looking back at me with pleading in her eyes. Only in my mind, she had Megan's face.

A pulled trigger.

Red mixing with red.

"Please," I said, frantic, scrambling for Prof. "Don't. We can think of something else. You heard about the nightmares. Is that what happens to you? Tell me, Prof. Was Megan right? Do they have something to do with weaknesses?"

He took me by the arm and shoved me backward. "I forgive you," he said. Then he walked toward the doorway.

"Prof?" I demanded, following him toward the door. "No! It—"

Prof raised a hand absently and a forcefield sprang into place in the doorway, separating us.

I pressed my palms on it, watching Prof walk down the hallway. "Prof! Jon Phaedrus!" I pounded on the forcefield, for all the good that did.

He stopped, then looked back at me. In that moment, his face in shadows, I didn't see Prof the leader—or even Prof the man.

I saw a High Epic who had been defied.

He turned and continued down the hallway, vanishing from my sight. The forcefield remained. If the jackets were any guide, it could stay in place as long as it was needed, and Prof could travel quite a distance without it vanishing.

A short time later I spotted the sub in the enormous window, passing in the dark water. They left me without my mobile, the spyril, or any way to escape.

I was alone.
Just me and the water.

PART FOUR

40

I spent the next hour or so slumped at Tia's desk in the meeting room, the huge window looming over me like a roommate who just heard you unwrap a bag of toffee-pulls. I stood up and began pacing, but moving only reminded me of what the team would be doing out there. Running, fighting for their lives. Trying to save the city.

And here I was. Benched.

I looked up at Prof's forcefield. I couldn't help feeling that Prof specifically wanted me out of the way for this operation—that catching me with Megan was an excuse, not a reason.

Megan. Sparks! *Megan*. He wouldn't really kill her, would he? My thoughts kept turning back to her over and over, like a penguin who couldn't be convinced that these plastic fish weren't real. She'd trusted me. She'd told me her weakness. Now Prof might kill her because of it.

I hadn't completely sorted out my emotions regarding her. But I *was* sure I didn't want her to get hurt.

I stalked back to the desk and sat, trying to keep my eyes off that dominating view of the dark waters. I started digging through the desk drawers, looking for something to distract myself. I found an emergency sidearm—just a little nine-millimeter, but at least I would be armed if I could ever get out of this stupid room—and ammunition. In another drawer I found a datapad. It had no connectivity to the Knighthawk networks, but it did contain a folder with a copy of Tia's notes about Regalia's location.

The map showed the path that the Reckoners would use for today's trap. They'd follow Newton on her rounds, then hit her in

a specific spot in an attempt to make Regalia appear. I found a little *X* on the datapad's battle map with an oblique reference to Prof in position for an emergency—and I now recognized that as an indication of where Prof would be waiting to stop Obliteration if necessary. But what were they planning to do about Megan?

Prof has my mobile, I thought. *He wouldn't even have to work to set a trap for Megan. All he'd have to do is send her a text asking to meet, then attack her*. And if she died by fire, she wouldn't reincarnate.

Feeling even more anxious, I started looking through the datapad, though for what I didn't know. Maybe Tia had recorded something about a plan to hurt Megan.

There. A file named "Firefight." I tapped it.

It turned out to be a video file.

Within seconds I knew what it was. A man, puffing with exertion, moved through one of the jungle-esque rooms of a Babilar high-rise. The recording was from his viewpoint, likely captured by one of the earpieces that the team often wore.

The man pushed through vines, passing fruit with a deep inner glow. He looked over his shoulder, then scrambled over a fallen tree trunk and peeked into another room.

"Sam." It was Val's voice. "You weren't supposed to engage."

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "But I did. So now what?"

"Get out."

"Working on it."

Sam crossed through this second room in a rush, moving along the wall. He stepped over a coffeemaker that had sprouts growing out of the top, hurried through a small break-room kitchen, and finally found a wall with windows. He glanced out at a drop of four stories, then looked back into the jungle.

"Go," Val said.

"I heard something."

"Go faster, then!"

Sam remained with a hand on the window frame. In the light of a glowing fruit I could make out his gloves. He was wearing the spyril.

"All we're doing is *watching*, Val," he whispered. "This isn't what I signed up for."

"Sam …"

"All right," he grumbled, then used his elbow to knock some of

the glass out of the frame so he could climb through. He pointed the streambeam down into the water below, but hesitated.

Something rustled in the room. Sam spun, a jarring motion of the camera accompanied by a muffled crunch as a vine brushed his earpiece.

Megan stood behind him, shadowed by draping foliage, wearing jeans and a tight T-shirt. She seemed surprised to see him, and didn't have her weapon out.

All grew still.

I found myself rising from my seat, words formed in my mouth. I wanted to scream at the screen, even though it was just a recording. "Just go," I said. I *pleaded*.

"Sam, *no*," Val said.

Sam reached for the gun at his side.

Megan drew faster.

It was over in under a second. I heard the shot, and then the camera lurched again. When it settled, Sam's camera faced a nearby wall. I heard Sam's breathing, labored, but he didn't move. A shadow settled over him, and I could hear shuffling and figured that Megan—ever conscious of firearms—was disarming Sam and checking to see if he was feigning injury.

Val started whispering something over and over. Sam's name.

I realized I was sweating.

Megan's shadow retreated and Sam's breathing grew worse and worse. Val tried to talk to him, told him that Exel was on his way, but Sam gave no response.

I didn't see his life end. But I heard it. One breath at a time until … nothing.

I sank down into the seat as the video stopped, Val's voice cutting out halfway through a yell for Exel to hurry. I felt like I'd watched something intimate, something I shouldn't have.

She really did kill him, I thought. It had kind of been self-defense, hadn't it? She'd checked on the noise he was making. He'd drawn a gun.…

Of course, Megan reincarnated if killed. Sam didn't.

I lowered the datapad, numb. I couldn't blame Megan for defending herself, but at the same time, it tore at me to think of what had happened. This could have been avoided so easily.

How much of what Megan had told me could I trust? After all, Prof had been spying on me. And now it turned out Megan really

had killed Sam. Unfortunately, I realized that deep down, I wasn't surprised. Megan had seemed uncomfortable when I'd mentioned Sam to her, and she hadn't explained herself or what had happened. I hadn't given her the chance.

I hadn't wanted to know.

Who could I trust? My emotions were a messed-up jumble, a churning stew of confusion, frustration, and nausea. Nothing made sense anymore. Not like it should have.

Gasping for breath …, Regalia had said to me.

I latched on to a thought, something different, something to pull me away from the muddle of how I felt about Megan, Prof, and the Reckoners. That day back when I'd first been practicing with the spyril, Regalia had appeared. She'd talked about how I'd die alone someday. *Gasping for breath in one of these jungle buildings, one step from freedom*, she'd said. *Your last sight a blank wall that someone had spilled coffee on. A pitiful, pathetic end*.

Though I hated to see any of this again, I rewound the video to Sam's last sight, his camera pointed at the wall. That wall *was* stained as if something had spilled on it.

Regalia had seen this video.

Oh, *sparks*. How much did she know? My discomfort with this entire mission flooded back. We didn't know half of what we thought we did. Of that I was certain.

I hesitated for a moment, then swiped everything off Tia's desk but the datapad.

I needed to think. About Epics, about Regalia, and about what I actually knew. I bottled up my emotions for the moment, and I set aside everything we assumed we knew. I even set aside my own notes, which I'd gathered before joining the Reckoners. Obliteration's powers proved that my own knowledge could be distinctly faulty.

So what did I actually *know* about Regalia?

One fact stood out to me. She'd had the Reckoners in hand, and had decided not to kill us. Why? Prof was certain she wanted him to kill her. I wasn't willing to make that leap. What other reasons could there be?

She confronted us that first night expecting to find Prof there, I thought. *Sure, she could have finished off most of us without a thought. But not Jonathan Phaedrus*.

She knew him as an Epic. She was familiar with his powers.

She had let us live, ostensibly to deliver the message that Prof was to kill her. Well, I didn't accept that she wanted to die. But why else would she goad Prof into coming to Babilar?

Regalia knew how Sam died, I thought. *In great detail. Detail that Megan was unlikely to have explained*. So either she'd watched that video, or she'd been there on that night.

Could she have pulled the strings from behind the scenes, engineering Sam's death? Or was I simply searching for ways to exonerate Megan?

I focused back on our first night in Babilar, when we had faced Obliteration. That fight had worn us out, and after we'd run, Regalia had appeared in her glory—but had been shocked that Prof wasn't there. What if Regalia had done this all to find a way to kill Prof? Prof knew a lot about Regalia's powers. He knew her limits, her range, the holes in her abilities. Could she have the same intelligence on him?

I suddenly imagined it all as an intricate Reckoner-style trap, one laid by Regalia to bring Prof here and eliminate him. A plot to remove one of the most powerful potential rivals to her dominance. It seemed like a tenuous connection, a stretch. But the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that Prof was in serious danger.

Could it really be that we had not been the hunters here at all? Were we, instead, the ones being trapped?

I stood. I had to get out. Prof was probably in danger. And even if he wasn't, I couldn't risk him attacking Megan. I needed answers from her. I needed to talk to her about Sam, about what she'd done. I needed to know how much of what she'd told me was a lie.

And … the truth was I loved her.

Despite it all—despite the questioning, despite feeling betrayed—I loved her. And I'd be *damned* before I let Prof kill her.

I strode to the door and tried to pry the forcefield out of the way. I tried pushing, thumping—I even grabbed the chair from the desk and beat it against the forcefield. All, of course, had no effect.

Breathing hard from the exertion, next I tried to break the wood of the frame *around* the forcefield. That didn't work either. I had no leverage and the building was too sturdy. Maybe with tools and a day or so, I could break through one of the walls into

another room, but that would take way too long. There were no other exits.

Except …

I turned and eyed the large window, taller than a man and several times as wide, looking out at the ocean. It was midnight, and therefore dark, but I could see shapes shifting out there in that awful blackness.

Each time I went into the water, I felt that void trying to suck me down. Consume me.

Slowly, I walked to Tia's desk and fished in the bottom drawer, picking up the nine-millimeter. A Walther. Good gun, one that even I'd admit was accurate. I loaded the ammo, then looked up at the window.

I immediately felt an oppressive dread. I'd come to an uneasy truce with the waters, yet I still felt like I could sense them eager to break through and crush me.

I was there again, in the blackness, with a weight on my leg towing me down into oblivion. How deep were we? I couldn't swim up from down here, could I?

What a stupid idea. I set the gun on the desk.

But … if I stay here, there's a good chance they both die. Prof kills Megan. Regalia kills Prof.

In the bank nearly eleven years ago, I'd cowered in fear when my father fought. He'd died.

Better to drown. I gathered up all of the emotions I felt at looking into the depths—the terror, the foreboding, the primal panic—and held them in hand. Then crushed them.

I would *not* be ruled by the waters. Pointedly, deliberately, I picked up Tia's gun again and leveled it at the window.

Then I fired.

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THE bullet barely harmed the window.

Oh, it made a tiny hole, which sent out a little spiderweb of cracks—like you see in bulletproof glass that takes a slug. Only this was just a nine-millimeter, and the window in front of me had been built to withstand a bombing. Feeling stupid, I shot again. And again. I unloaded the entire magazine into the glass wall, making my ears ring.

The window didn't break. It barely sprung a small leak. Great. Now I was going to drown in this room. Judging by the size of that leak, I only had … oh, somewhere around six months before it filled the entire place.

I sighed, slumping down in the chair. Idiot. And here I'd faced the depths, challenged my fears, and prepared myself for a dramatic swim to freedom. Instead I now had to listen to tinkling water dripping onto the wood floor—the ocean making fun of me.

I stared at it pooling on the ground and had another really bad idea.

Well, I've already sold the family name for three oranges, I thought. I dragged one of the room's bookshelves over and obscured the doorway and the forcefield. Then I took out one of the desk drawers and put it under the leak to contain some of the water. A few minutes later, I had a respectable pool in there.

"Hello, Regalia," I said. "This is David Charleston, the one called Steelslayer. I'm inside the Reckoners' secret base."

I repeated this several times, but nothing happened of course. We were all the way out on Long Island, well outside Regalia's range. I'd just hoped that maybe, if she really *was* playing us all,

Prof and Tia's information about her range might be—

The water in my drawer started to move and shift.

I yelped, stumbling back as the little hole I'd made in the window expanded, water forcing its way through in a larger stream. It rose up, growing into a shape, then stopped flowing as color flooded the figure.

"You mean to tell me," Regalia said, "that all this time I had my agents searching along the northern coast, when he had a sparking *underwater base*?"

I backed away, heart thumping. She was so calm, so certain, wearing her business suit, a string of pearls around her neck. Regalia was not out of control. She knew exactly what she was doing in this city.

She looked me up and down, as if evaluating me. Tia's information about Regalia's range was wrong. Maybe her powers, like Obliteration's, had been enhanced somehow.

Everything that was happening in this city was wrong.

"So, he locked you away, did he?" Regalia asked.

"Uh …" I tried to decide how to game Regalia. If that was even possible. My vague plan of acting like I wanted to defect to her side seemed pitifully obvious now.

"Yes, you *are* an articulate one," Regalia said. "Well, brains don't necessarily accompany passion. In fact, they might often have an inverse relationship. What will Jonathan do to you, I wonder, when he finds out you've revealed his base to me?"

"Megan already found it," I answered. "So far as Prof thinks, this place has been exposed and is no longer a valid base."

"Pity," Regalia said, looking around. "This *is* a fine location. Jonathan always did have a keen sense of style. He might fight against his nature, but aspects of him so blatantly show his heritage. His extravagant bases, the nicknames, the costume he wears."

Costume? *Black lab coat. Goggles in the pocket*. It *was* a little eccentric, actually.

"Well, be quick with your request, boy," Regalia said. "It is a busy day."

"I want to protect Megan," I said. "He's going to kill her."

"And if I help you with this, will you serve me?"

"Yes."

This is one of the most cunning Epics in the world, I thought to

myself. *You really think she'll believe you'd swap sides, just like that?*

I was banking on the fact that she'd shown an interest in me earlier. Of course, she had also said that she was mad at me for killing Steelheart. Perhaps, now that her plan to bring down Prof was in full swing, she'd just crush me.

Regalia waved a hand.

Water shattered the wall, ripping apart the hole I'd made and destroying the glass. I didn't even have time to grab the gun off the desk as the water filled the room, plunging me into darkness. I sputtered and thrashed. I may have faced my fear of these depths, but that didn't mean I was *comfortable* in them.

I was completely incapable of thinking or swimming consciously. I'd have died there if Regalia hadn't towed me upward. I had a sense of motion, and when I broke the surface—gasping and cold—my ears hurt for some reason.

The water beneath me grew *solid* somehow. A small pedestal of water raised me up, and Regalia appeared standing beside me. I lay there, shivering and wet, and eventually I realized we were moving. The water pedestal was zipping along the surface of the ocean, carrying me with it, approaching the glowing painted walls and bridges of Babilar.

Regalia could appear wherever she wanted—or, at least, she could appear anyplace that she could see. So this wasn't about transporting her, but about moving me.

"Where are we going?" I asked, getting to my knees.

"Has Jonathan ever told you," Regalia asked, "what we know about the nature of Calamity?"

I could see it up there, that omnipresent glowing dot. Brighter than a star, but far smaller than the moon.

"You can view Calamity through a telescope," Regalia continued, speaking in a conversational way. "The four of us did it quite often, back in the day. Jonathan, myself, Lincoln. Even with a telescope, it's hard to make out details. He glows very brightly, you see."

"*He?*" I asked.

"But of course," Regalia said. "Calamity is an Epic. What else did you expect?"

I … I couldn't respond. I could barely even blink.

"I asked him about you," she said. "Told him you'd make a wonderful Epic. It would solve all kinds of problems, you see, and

I think you'd take to it quite nicely. Ah, here we are."

I struggled to my feet as our water platform stopped moving. We were in the lower section of Babilar, near where the operation to take out Newton would soon begin. It seemed Regalia knew about that too.

"You're lying."

"Do you know of the Rending?" Regalia asked. "That's what we call the time just after an Epic first gains their powers. You'll feel an overwhelming sensation driving you to destroy, to break. It utterly consumes us. Some learn to manage with the feelings, as I have. Others, like dear Obliteration, never quite get beyond them."

"No," I whispered, feeling a growing horror.

"If it's any consolation, you'll probably forget most of what you're about to do. You'll wake up in a day or so with only vague memories of the people you killed." She leaned in, voice growing harsher. "I'm going to *enjoy* watching this, David Charleston. It is poetry for one who has killed so many of us to become the thing he hates. I believe, in the end, that is what convinced Calamity to agree to my request."

She slapped me in the chest with a liquid hand, shoving me off her platform. I fell backward into the waters, and they churned about me, raising me in a pillar toward the night sky. I sputtered, righting myself, and discovered that I was hanging some hundred feet in the air, as if on an enormous jet made by the spyril. I looked upward.

And there was Calamity.

The star burned fiercely, and the land around me seemed to grow red, bathed in a deep light. Like on that first night, so long ago, when Calamity had come and the world had changed. Impossibilities, chaos, followed by Epics.

It dominated my view, that burning redness. I didn't feel as if I —or it—had changed locations, and yet suddenly it was all that I could see. I felt, against reason, that I was so close I could reach out and touch the star. And within that blazing, violent redness, I *swore* I saw a pair of fiery wings.

My skin grew cold, then shocked alive with a tingling, electric sensation—as if recovering from numbness. I screamed, doubling upon myself. Sparks! I could *feel* it coursing through me. A foul energy, a transformation.

It was really happening.

No, no … Please …

The redness upon the land retreated, and my water pillar slowly lowered. I barely noticed, as the tingling feeling continued, more frantic, like thousands of worms squirming under my skin.

"It is unsettling at first," Regalia said softly as I lowered down to sea level beside her. "I have been assured that you will be given powers that are 'thematically appropriate.' I suggested the same water-manipulation abilities that young Georgi possessed. That, if you have forgotten, is the Epic who was killed to make that abomination you call the spyril. I think you'll find being an Epic to be *far* more liberating than using some device to ape us."

I groaned, rolling over, face toward the sky. Calamity now seemed only a distant prick, but that red glow upon the land remained—faint, but noticeable. Everything around me was bathed in a shade of crimson.

"Well, on with it," Regalia said. "Let's see what you can do. I am *distinctly* interested to see how your former teammates react when you bumble into the middle of their careful planning, manifesting Epic powers, murdering everyone you see. It should be … amusing."

A distant part of my brain realized that this was why she'd been so fast to help me escape the base. She hadn't believed I was defecting; she intended to use me, and my new powers, as a way to disrupt the Reckoners' plans.

I rolled back over, finding my way to my knees, still positioned on a section of water that Regalia had made solid. My face reflected in the waters, lit by spraypaint on a nearby building.

Was I now an Epic?

Yes. I felt it was true. What had just happened between me and Calamity was no trick. But still, I had to test it. I had to know for absolute certain.

And then I would kill myself, quickly, before the desires consumed me.

I reached out to touch the water.

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I felt something.

Well, I felt the water, of course. I mean something else. Something inside of me. A stirring.

Hand on the surface of the water, I peered into those depths. Just beneath me was an ancient steel bridge cluttered with a line of rusted cars. A window into another world, an old world, a time before.

I imagined what it would have been like to live in this city when the waters swept in. My fears returned, the images of being crushed, drowned, trapped.

Only … I found that they didn't control me as they once had. I was able to shove them aside. Nothing would ever again be as bad as standing before the glass wall beneath the ocean and firing a pistol toward it, inviting the sea to come and crush me.

Take it, a voice said in my head. A quiet, distant voice, but a real one. *Take this power. It is yours*.

I …

Take it!

"No."

The tingling vanished.

I blinked at the waters. Calamity's light had retreated, and everything looked normal again.

I stumbled to my feet and turned to face Regalia.

She smiled. "Ah, it takes hold!"

"Nah," I said. "I'm a washing machine at a gun show."

She blinked, looking totally befuddled. "… What did you just say?"

"Washing machine?" I said. "Gun show? You know. Washing

machines don't use guns, right? No fingers. So if they're at a gun show, there's nothing they'd want to buy. Anyway, I'm good here. Not interested."

"Not … interested. It doesn't matter if you're interested or not! You don't get a *choice*."

"Made one anyway," I said. "Thanks, though. Nice of you to think of me."

Regalia worked her mouth as if trying to speak, but no sound came out. Her eyes bulged as she regarded me. Gone was her posture of dominance and control.

I smiled and shrugged. Inside, I was working frantically on some way to escape. Would she destroy me, now that I'd failed to become part of her plans? The only place for me to go was into the water—which, considering her abilities, didn't seem wise.

But I wasn't an Epic. I had no doubt that she'd just *tried* to give me powers, as she said she could do. I had no doubt that I'd heard Calamity's voice in my mind.

It just hadn't worked on me.

"Epic powers," I said to Regalia, meeting her gaze, "are tied to your fears, aren't they?"

Regalia's eyes widened even further. A piece of me found it supremely satisfying to see Regalia so flummoxed, and it seemed further proof to me that everything else she'd done had been calculated. Even when she'd seemed out of control, she'd known what she was doing.

All except for this moment.

She glanced away and cursed. Then she vanished. I, of course, immediately dropped into the ocean.

I sputtered a bit but managed to paddle myself to the nearest Babilar building. Mizzy would have laughed to see my silly version of a swimming stroke, but it worked well enough. I hauled myself up out of the water and into the building through a window. It took about five minutes to find the stairwell—there were paths worn through this building, probably made by people gathering fruit—and climb to the roof two stories above.

It was a typical Babilar night, with people sitting out, legs hanging off the edges of their rooftops. Some fished, others lazily gathered fruit. One group sang softly as someone played an old guitar. I shivered, soaked through, and tried to sort out what had just happened to me.

Calamity was an Epic. Some kind of … super-powerful gifter, perhaps? Could it be that there had really only been one single Epic all along, and everyone else held an offshoot of his powers?

Well, Regalia was in communication with him, whoever he was. She'd left me alone. Was it because her failure to make me an Epic had spooked her? She'd looked to the side at the end; it was hard to remember sometimes that she was actually in her hidden base, with other things happening around her there. Perhaps something had distracted her.

Well, I was free, for the moment. And I still had work to do. I took a deep breath and tried to orient myself, but I had only a vague idea of where I was. I jogged up to a group of people cooking soup beside some tents; they were listening to the music of a quiet radio—probably a live broadcast by someone else in the city. They looked up at me, and one offered me a water bottle.

"Thanks, uh, but I can't stay," I said. "Um …" How could I say this without sounding suspicious? "I'm totally normal and not weird at all. But I need to get to Finkle Crossway. Which direction is that again?"

An aging woman wearing a glowing blue knit shawl pointed with a lazy gesture. "Ten or so bridges that way. Turn left at the really tall building, keep going. That'll take you past Turtle Bay, though.…"

"Um. Yeah?"

"Big Epic there," a man filled in. "Glowing."

Oh, right. Obliteration. Well, surprisingly, he was the least of my problems. I took off, running the direction indicated, trying to keep my attention on the task at hand, not on Calamity. I needed to save Megan, get some answers, warn Prof that Regalia's range was wider than he and Tia thought.

What would Prof do when he saw me free from the base? It probably wouldn't be good, but I had to believe that he'd listen to me when I explained that Regalia had appeared at the base.

Ten bridges? That was a long run, and time was short. The Reckoners had likely already started putting their plan into motion. I needed my mobile. Sparks, I needed more than that! I needed a weapon, information, and—preferably—an army or two. Instead I ran, alone and unarmed, across a wooden bridge where each board had been painted a different color.

Think, think! I couldn't reach them in time, even running all the way. So what could I do?

Well, I knew the plan. The Reckoners would follow Newton doing her nightly rounds. That would start midtown, then sweep through the city down toward old Chinatown, where the hit would happen. So, if I could position myself in the middle of that path, they'd theoretically come to *me* instead of me needing to find them.

By asking a few more people for directions, I was able to make my way to Bob's Cathedral, a place I knew would be along Newton's route. The grandly named locale was just a rooftop spraypainted on the top and sides like a series of stained glass windows. The place had a dense population, and Tia suspected that it was on Newton's rounds because it let her show off and remind everyone who ruled the city.

I slowed my pace as I neared, joining a line of people moving up a bridge toward the colorfully painted building. Sparks, the place was busy. As I reached the top, I found that it was a market, full of tents and shacks. The tents displayed wares ranging from things as simple as hats made from Babilar tree fronds to products as exotic as salvage from the old days. I passed one man who had bins of windup toys. He sat behind them with a small screwdriver, fixing a broken one. Another woman sold empty milk jugs, which she claimed were perfect for storing fruit juice. A few full ones sat out glowing brightly to prove her point.

The press of bodies and the chatter was—for once—something I found relieving. It would be easier to hide here, though I had to make certain I was in position to spot Newton when she came. I lingered by one stall that was selling clothing. Simple stuff, really just sheets of cloth cut with armholes. One was a cloak, though, that glowed bright blue. Perfectly unobtrusive here in Babilar.

"Like what you see?" asked a young girl seated on a stool beneath the awning.

"I could use the cloak," I said, pointing. "But I don't have much to trade."

"You've got nice shoes."

I looked down. My sneakers. Good rubber on those, the type that was getting harder and harder to find. If I was going to be chasing the Reckoners, I suspected I'd need my footwear. I fished in my pockets and only came out with one thing. The chain that

Abraham had given me, with the symbol of the Faithful dangling at the end.

The young girl's eyes widened.

I stood for a long moment.

Then I traded my shoes instead. I wasn't certain how much my shoes were worth, but I just kept haggling, adding things until I walked away with the cloak, a pair of worn-out sandals, and a pretty-good-looking knife.

I put on my new gear and found my way to a tavern on the side of the rooftop, a place Newton stopped for a drink most nights before continuing on to harass the various shopkeepers of the cathedral. It sold alcohol that glowed faintly in the night. If there was a universal law regarding mankind, it was that they'd find a way to ferment anything, given time.

I didn't order a drink, but instead settled down outside on the ground next to the tavern's wooden wall, hood drooping over my eyes. Just another idle Babilaran. Then I tried to decide what I'd do if Newton actually appeared.

I had about two minutes to think on it before she strolled right past me. She was dressed in the same retro-punk style from before, a leather jacket with pieces of metal jutting out of it, like it was wrapping paper that had been pulled tight around a death machine. Short hair, cut and dyed various colors.

She was tailed by two of her flunkies, dressed with similar flamboyance, and they didn't stop to get a drink. Heart racing, I stood up and followed them as they prowled through the market. Where was Val? She'd be the one tailing Newton—Exel and Tia would be somewhere nearby in the submarine. Would Mizzy be on sniper duty, then? Bob's Cathedral was a tall building, so there weren't many places nearby to give a proper vantage, and sniping would be tough with all these people. Maybe Mizzy would be stationed somewhere farther south, close to where the trap was supposed to take place.

I was intent on finding Val or Exel, so I saw when a man emerged from the crowd and hurled a piece of fruit at Newton. It soared through the air and made contact in a way—Newton's powers engaged immediately, reflecting the energy. The fruit bounced back and exploded when it hit the ground. The Epic spun around, searching for the source of the attack.

I froze in place, sweating. Did I look suspicious? Newton

pointed, and one of her flunkies—a tall, muscular woman wearing a jacket missing the sleeves—took off after the man who'd thrown the fruit. He was doing his best to disappear into the crowd.

Sparks! This wasn't part of the plan; it was just a bystander making a snap decision. Suddenly *another* piece of fruit flew at Newton, coming from another direction, along with a cry of "Building Seventeen!" This one was deflected too, of course, and the crowd immediately began to make itself scarce. I had no choice but to join them, lest I be left standing alone when the roof cleared.

This was exactly the sort of thing the Reckoners hated. I could imagine the chatter over the mobiles now, Val explaining that some locals had gotten it into their heads to get retribution for the building Newton had burned down. As much as I appreciated some people of Babilar finally showing a spine, I couldn't help but be annoyed by their timing.

Tia would want to abort, of course, but I doubted that Prof would let it happen over something as simple as this. I joined a bunch of people crowding into a nearby shop tent, the owner yelling for them not to lay their hands on anything. I pocketed a pair of walkie-talkies, feeling only slightly guilty about it. As I was stuffing them into my cloak, I heard an odd noise. Whispering? Like someone talking under their breath.

Something about it seemed familiar. Cautious, I looked around. Standing not three people from me, pressed in by the hiding crowd, was a woman in a nondescript glowing green cloak. I could just make out her face peeking out underneath her hood.

It was Mizzy.

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YES, it *was* Mizzy, a pack slung over her shoulder, muttering quietly to herself—no doubt speaking to the other Reckoners. She didn't seem to have noticed me.

Sparks! I'd been so focused on finding Val that I hadn't thought they might finally let Mizzy take point.

A scream came from outside. It seemed that Newton's goons had found one of the malcontents.

Mizzy danced from one foot to the other, anxious; she wouldn't want to let Newton get away from her. Conversely, *I'd* found my target, and was perfectly happy letting Newton go bother someone else.

I needed to get Mizzy alone, only for a few minutes, then explain myself. How to do that without her immediately calling to Prof and the others? I had little doubt that Val would shoot me, no questions asked—she already had—and Prof would probably be in line right after her, if his powers really were starting to get to him. Mizzy, though … I might be able to convince Mizzy.

First I had to get the earpiece out of her ear. I wiggled through the tent, riding the shifting press of people as some in front peeked out to see what was happening. I managed to place myself right behind Mizzy.

Then, heart pounding, I took out the knife—leaving it sheathed, since I didn't actually want to hurt her—and pressed it against Mizzy's back. At the same moment, I put my hand over her mouth.

"Don't move," I whispered.

She went stiff. I reached my hand into her hood and grabbed

the earpiece, then fiddled with it, flipping the off switch. Perfect. Now I just—

Mizzy twisted, grabbed my arm, and I'm not sure what happened next. Suddenly I was bursting out the back flaps of the tent, the world spinning. I hit the rooftop on my shoulder, the knife skidding from my hand.

Mizzy was on top of me a second later, arm raised to punch, her face framed by glowing green cloth. She saw me and immediately gasped. "Oh!" She patted me on the shoulder. "David! Are you all right?"

"I—"

"Wait!" she exclaimed, clamping her hand over her mouth. "I hate you!"

She raised her fist again and punched me right in the gut. And Calamity, she could *punch*. I growled, twisting—mostly in pain—and threw her off me. I managed to stumble to my feet and went for the knife, but Mizzy grabbed me under the arm and …

Well, everything flipped around again, and suddenly I was on my back, completely out of breath. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. I was way bigger than she was. Wasn't I supposed to win in a fight? True, I didn't have much hand-to-hand training, and she seemed to have … well, more than "not much."

She had dropped her pack in the chaos and was reaching into her cloak for a gun. Not good. I managed to get to my feet again, wheezing, and jumped for her. She might get to pound on me some more, but so long as she was doing that, she wouldn't be shooting me. Theoretically.

However, what she pulled out wasn't a gun; it was a mobile. Almost as bad—she was going to call the team. I slammed into her as she was distracted. The mobile bounced away, and Mizzy struggled against my grip, getting her arm up and ramming her thumb right into my eye.

I yelped, throwing myself backward, blinking at the pain. Mizzy rolled for her mobile. So I kicked it.

Kind of too hard. It skidded right off the side of the roof. Mizzy threw herself that direction in a futile attempt to grab it. I took a moment to look around—one eye still squeezed shut. The tent we'd been in was shaking, one of the poles having collapsed as Mizzy threw me out the back. Off to our right, one of Newton's gang members was prowling through the streets between tents,

perhaps looking for the people who had attacked her, perhaps just watching the perimeter. I ducked to the side and pulled up my hood again, my back against the wall of a wooden shack.

Nearby, Mizzy looked up from the edge of the rooftop and glared at me. “What’s *wrong* with you?” she hissed.

“Someone poked me in the eye!” I snapped back. “That’s what’s wrong.”

“I—”

“Quiet!” I said. “One of Newton’s gang is coming this way.” I peeked around the side of the building and immediately cursed, ducking back around. Newton was there too now. Both were walking in our direction.

Sparks! I thought, searching for shelter. It was impossible to hide in the shadows of this stupid city because there *weren’t* any. The painted ground glowed under my feet with a sequence of vibrant, glassy colors.

One of the shacks ahead of me had a door that leaned open. I scrambled for it. Mizzy cursed and ran after me, pack over her shoulder. Inside I found a set of steps. What I’d mistaken for a shack was actually part of the larger skyscraper. A lot of these buildings had little structures on top, housing stairwells or storage. This one had steps that led down to the top floor.

I pulled off my cloak and wrapped it up as Mizzy crowded in behind me. She shut the door, then pressed a gun against my side.

Great.

“I don’t think it was related,” a woman’s voice said from outside. “This was just a coincidence.”

“They’re getting restless.” That was Newton’s voice. “A populace needs to be properly cowed to serve. Regalia shouldn’t hold me back.”

“Bah,” the first voice said. “You think you could do a better job, Newton? You’d lose control of this place in two weeks flat.”

I frowned at that comment, but only then did I realize the conversation was growing louder. With a start at my own stupidity, I twitched toward the stairs leading down.

Mizzy grabbed my shoulder and pressed the handgun into me more firmly. By the light of her hood, I could see her lips as she mouthed, “Don’t move.”

I pointed outside. “They’re coming in here!” I hissed.

Mizzy hesitated and I risked pulling out of her grip, then scrambled down the steps as quietly as I could. She followed reluctantly. It wasn't happenstance that Newton had been coming this direction; she'd been looking for this very building.

Indeed, I heard the door open above us. I tried to move as quietly as possible down the stairwell, but soon found myself face to face with a wall of plants. Sparks! No way through. The stairwell was completely overgrown.

I spun around and put my back to the plants, heart pounding. Mizzy, still wearing a glowing cloak, joined me.

"I'm out of sight," Newton's voice echoed softly in the stairwell from above. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure they're following. You want to keep on with this?"

Silence.

"Yeah, fine," Newton said. "Then what am I to do?"

More silence. She was talking to Regalia and had wanted to duck out of sight while she did it, so her tail wouldn't overhear her or record her lip movements. Ordinarily that would be smart —except for the fact that she'd chosen a location populated by two Reckoners.

Well, one and a half Reckoners.

"Yeah, I suppose," Newton said.

More silence.

"Fine. But I don't like being bait. Remember that." The broken door above opened, then swung closed. Newton was gone.

"What did you tell her?" Mizzy demanded, stepping away from me and leveling the gun in my direction, pack still over her shoulder. "She knows we're following her? How much have you betrayed?"

"Nothing and everything," I said with a sigh, letting myself slide down into a seated position, my back to the vine-covered wall. Now that the tense moment had passed, I realized just how much I hurt from being thrown around by Mizzy. I'd started to take for granted that such things wouldn't hurt as much as they should, because they hadn't in a long time. Prof's forcefields had done their job well.

"What do you mean?" Mizzy demanded.

"Regalia knew about all our plans already. She appeared to me in the base."

"What?" Mizzy looked appalled. "*You let water into the base?*"

“Yeah, but that’s not the important part. She appeared there. Mizzy, that’s supposedly outside of her range. Regalia has been playing us all along, and the plan is in serious danger.”

Mizzy’s face, shadowed and lit only by the glow of her cloak, was creased in worry. She bit her lip, but when I shifted, she straightened the arm holding the gun—and her grip didn’t waver. She was young and inexperienced, but she wasn’t incompetent. My aching shoulder and eye were proof of that.

“I need to contact the others,” she said.

“Which is why I came to you.”

“You put a knife to my back!”

“I wanted to explain myself,” I said, “before you brought the Reckoners down on me. Look, I think Regalia is planning to kill Prof. She’s been leading us along, setting up a trap for him. She knows he’s the only one who can stop her from dominating, so she wants to bring him down.”

Mizzy wavered. “You’re working with her.”

“Regalia?”

“No. Firefight.”

Oh. “Yes,” I said softly. “I am.”

“You admit it?”

I nodded.

“She killed Sam!”

“I’ve seen the video. Sam pulled a gun on her, Mizzy, and she’s a trained marksman. He tried to shoot her, so she shot back first.”

“But she’s evil, David,” Mizzy pleaded, stepping forward.

“Megan saved my life,” I said. “When Obliteration tried to kill me. That’s how I got away from him, when you were otherwise occupied.”

“Prof said she was toying with you,” Mizzy said. “He said you’d been compromised by your … affection for her.” Mizzy looked at me as if begging for it to not be true. “Even if he’s wrong, David, she’s an *Epic*. It’s our job to kill them.”

I sat in that darkened stairwell, eye smarting—I could still see with it, fortunately, but it hurt. Mizzy had gotten me pretty good. I sat there wondering, remembering. Thinking about the kid I’d been, studying every Epic. Hating them all. Making my plans to kill Steelheart.

I knew what Mizzy felt like. I’d been her. It was crazy, but I guess I wasn’t that person anymore. The shift had started back on

that day I'd defeated Steelheart. I'd flown away in the copter, carrying his skull in my hands, overwhelmed. My father's murderer dead, but only because of the help of another Epic.

What did I really believe? I fished in my pocket and pulled out the pendant Abraham had given me. It caught light from somewhere, a glow reflecting off a metal banister above, and sparkled. The symbol of the Faithful. "No," I said, finally understanding. "We don't kill Epics."

"But—"

"We kill criminals, Mizzy." I reached up and put on the necklace, then I stood. "We bring justice to those who have murdered. We don't kill them because of what they are. We kill them because of the lives they threaten." I'd been thinking about this the wrong way all my life.

Mizzy looked at that small pendant, with its stylized symbol at the end, hanging outside my shirt. "She's still a criminal. Sam—"

"Will you execute her, Mizzy?" I asked. "Will you pull the trigger, knowing you've negated her powers and there's nothing she can do? Will you watch that moment of realization in her eyes? Because I've done it, and I'll tell you: it's not nearly as easy as it sounds."

I met her eyes in the dim light. Then I started walking up the steps.

Mizzy held her gun on me for a moment, hand quivering. Then she looked away and lowered the weapon.

"We need to warn the others," I said. "And, since I was stupid enough to ruin your mobile, I need to reach the submarine instead. Do you know where it is?"

"No," Mizzy said. "Nearby, I think."

I continued up the steps.

"He's planning to kill her," Mizzy said. "While we're here, tailing Newton, Prof is going to trap and kill Firefight."

I continued up the steps, a cold sweat chilling my brow. "I have to get to him. Somehow, I need to stop him from—"

"You won't get there in time," Mizzy said. "Not without this, at least."

I froze in place. Below, Mizzy unslung the pack from her shoulder and unzipped it.

She had the spyril inside.

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I rushed back down the stairs and helped Mizzy get out the spyril. I started strapping it on.

"I'm helping you," Mizzy said, kneeling beside me and working on my leg straps. "Why am I *helping* you?"

"Because I'm right," I said. "Because Regalia is smarter than we are—and because everything about this mission feels off, and you know something awful is going to happen if we go through with it."

She sat up. "Huh. Yeaaah, you should have said that stuff earlier. Maybe I wouldn't have punched you so much."

"I tried," I said. "The punching kind of got in the way."

"Really, somebody needs to teach you some hand-to-hand. Your showing was *pathetic*."

"I don't need hand-to-hand," I said. "I'm a gunman."

"And where's your gun?"

"Ah … right."

I shrugged the spyril's main mechanism onto my back and pulled the straps tight while Mizzy handed up the gloves. "You know," she said, "I was really looking forward to using this thing to prove how awesome I was, so Prof would agree I'd make a great point woman."

"And do you have any idea how to use the spyril?"

"I put the thing together and I maintain it. I've got heaps of theoretical knowledge."

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"How hard can it be?" She shrugged. "*You* figured it out, after all.…"

I grinned, but there wasn't much emotion behind it. "Do you

know where Prof was going to trap Megan?"

"Down by where we're planning to hit Newton. He set up a meeting between you and her, using your phone."

"Down where … But that's a long ways from where Obliteration is set up."

Mizzy shrugged. "Prof wanted to do the Firefight hit in the same region as the Newton hit. The point is to get Regalia to manifest there, right? Giving Tia the last data point she needs to pinpoint where Regalia's hiding. Of course, if her range is greater than we think, that's all pointless.…"

"Exactly," I said.

Prof's plan made sense, though, at least with the limited information he had. If the point was to draw Regalia, then hitting two of her Epics—instead of one—would be that much more likely to get her attention.

"If Prof is down in Chinatown," I said, "then who's watching Obliteration?"

"Nobody. Prof said it was unlikely he'd be charged enough to release his power today. And we have the camera, so Tia can watch him."

I felt cold. Everything we'd done could have been part of Regalia's plan, camera included. "How quickly do you think you can get there to check on Obliteration?"

"Ten, fifteen minutes, running. Why?"

"Let's just say I have a really, really bad feeling about all of this."

"Okaaaay …" She stood back, the spyril strapped into place on me. "You looked far more dashing with the wetsuit, you know. It gave you a kind of crazy-Navy-SEAL-special-ops-dude feel. Without it, you have more of a crazy-homeless-guy-who-strapped-a-toaster-to-his-back vibe."

"Great. Maybe it will make people underestimate me."

"Prof's an Epic, isn't he?" she asked softly.

I glanced at her, then nodded, fitting my hands into the gloves one at a time. "When did you figure it out?"

"I'm not sure. It just kind of makes sense, you know? The way you've all been acting around him, the secrets, the way Tia wouldn't explain how you rescued those people in the building. I probably should have put it together earlier."

"You're smarter than I am. He had to put a forcefield in front of

my face before I realized what he was."

"So this isn't about us getting revenge or putting down Epics or even punishing criminals," Mizzy said, sounding exhausted. "It's a power struggle. A turf war."

"No," I said firmly. "It's about making Prof be the man I know he can be … the Epic I know he can be."

"I don't get it," Mizzy said. "Why isn't he those things already?"

"Because," I said, pulling the second glove tight, "sometimes you have to help the heroes along."

"All riiight," she said.

"Here," I said, handing her one of the walkie-talkies I'd stolen. "We can keep in contact with these."

She shrugged, taking the hand radio. She fished a plastic baggie out of her pocket and put it in. "In case it falls in the water," she noted, shaking it.

"Good idea," I said, taking one of the baggies.

Mizzy hesitated, then handed over her gun as well. It was dark, but I thought she was blushing. "Here," she said. "Since I'm obviously not cut out for using one of these."

"Thanks," I said. "Ammo?"

She only had one extra magazine. Well, it was better than nothing. I slipped the magazine into my pocket and the handgun into my waistband.

"All right," I said. "Let's go."

45

I burst up out of the stairwell, spyril humming on my back, and emerged to a nauseating scene. Newton's people had found the malcontents who had thrown the fruit, it appeared, for two men hung dead from tent poles near where I emerged. A glowing piece of fruit had been stuffed into each of their mouths; iridescent juice ran down the sides of their faces and dripped from their chins.

I saluted them as I ran past. They'd acted foolishly, but they'd fought back. That was better than most in this city. As I ran, merchants looked up from stalls where they packed away wares. Some people knelt praying to Dawnslight, and they called to me, inviting me to join. I ignored everyone, making my way straight to the edge of the rooftop, then leaped. A moment later I shot into the air on jets of water.

I leaned forward, the buildings blurring past as the spyril powered me down the street. I had to cut the jets to quarter power to drop below a swinging bridge, but I popped back up on the other side, smiling as I caught sight of a dozen or so children lined up, pointing toward me.

My hand radio crackled. "This thing working?" Mizzy asked.

"Yup," I said back.

No reply.

Right. Stupid thing. I pointedly pushed down the broadcast button. "It's working, Mizzy," I said, raising the walkie-talkie to my lips.

"Great." Her voice was staticky. Sparks! These things were only about one step up from two cans with a string between them.

"I might not always be able to reply," I said back to her. "When

I'm using the spyril, I need both hands to turn."

"Just try to keep the radio from getting too wet," Mizzy said. "Old technology doesn't mix well with water."

"Understood," I said back. "I'll treat it like a giant, angry, man-eating dragon."

"And … what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, would *you* throw water on a giant, angry, man-eating dragon?" Buildings full of neon light whooshed past me on either side. At this rate, I'd reach Prof's location in minutes.

"No sign of the submarine or the others up here, David," Mizzy said. I had to hold the thing right up to my ear to hear over the sound of the wind. "They should have sent someone to investigate why I went silent. Something must have stopped them."

"Continue on to Obliteration," I said. "We don't have time to waste. Tell me what he's doing."

"Gotcha," Mizzy said.

I just had to—

A spurt of water rose up beside me from below and formed into Regalia. She hung in the air next to me, moving at my same speed, a small line of water connecting her to the ocean's surface.

"You have upset my plans," she noted. "I'm not fond of people who do that. Calamity won't respond to my questions of why you didn't gain powers."

I continued jetting along. Maybe she'd keep talking and give me a chance to get closer to Prof.

"What *did* you do?" she asked. "To reject the boon? I hadn't thought it possible."

I gave no reply.

"Very well then," Regalia said with a sigh. "You realize I can't let you reach Jonathan. Good night, David Charleston, Steelslayer."

The water spraying from my jets below suddenly split, blowing out to the sides instead of striking the ocean surface. But I didn't fall, at least not by much, as the water wasn't holding me aloft—the force of it jetting out did that. Regalia, it appeared, didn't quite understand the physics of the spyril. I wasn't surprised. Epics rarely have to pay attention to physics.

I jetted to the side and ignored her interference, dodging around a building by using the handjet to maneuver. Regalia

appeared beside me a moment later, and large columns of water rose from the street below to grab me.

I took a deep breath, tucked my radio in the baggie in my pocket, then threw myself to the side, dodging down another street. Dozens of tendrils from the deep below snaked upward, reaching for me. I had to turn my jets downward and shoot straight up in order to avoid being snared. Unfortunately, Regalia's tendrils followed, twisting and writhing just beneath me. My jets started to lose power as I got too high—the streambeam could only reach so far.

I had no choice but to twist in the air and jet back downward. I crashed through the side of a tendril, a wash of crisp coldness enveloping me, but exited the other side in a spray. The tendril tried to wrap around me, but it was a hair too slow. They relied on Regalia's direction to work, and seemed to only be as fast as she could give them orders.

Feeling a boost of confidence, I wove between the other tendrils of water as I fell, wind buffeting my face, before finally twisting and slowing my fall when I was near to the surface. I shot down another street, weaving from side to side as enormous waves of water formed beneath, seeking to crash down upon me. I managed to get out of the way of each one.

"You," Regalia said, appearing beside me, "are as annoying a rat as Jonathan himself."

I grinned, spraying downward with the handjet and bobbing myself upward over another growing tendril. I twisted to the side and slashed between two others. I was now thoroughly soaked—hopefully that radio's baggie would hold.

This was the most thrilling thing I'd ever done, jetting through this city of dark velvety blacks and vibrant colors, passing amazed locals, open-mouthed, on rocking boats. In Newcago there had been a rule to never let me drive, just because of a few unfortunate incidents with cars and … um … walls. With the spyril, though, I could move with freedom and power. I didn't need a car. I *was* a car.

As I came to another batch of tendrils, I jetted to the side, leaning into the turn like a surfer, then shot down a side road. I almost smashed right into an enormous wall of water, as tall as the rooftops on either side, rising to tower over me. It immediately began to crash downward.

In a panic I screamed and jetted sideways through a window and into one of the buildings. I hit the floor in a roll, my jets cutting off. Water smashed into the wall outside, washing into the windows and across me. Various office paraphernalia surged upward, banging against tree trunks, but the water quickly rushed out the other direction.

Wet, frantic, I scrambled deeper into the office jungle. Tendrils of water broke in through the windows at my back, snaking after me. Sparks! I instinctively scrambled deeper into the structure, farther from the water outside—and the source of Regalia's power. But that also put me far from the source of the spyril's power. Without it, I was just a wet guy with a handgun facing down one of the most powerful Epics who had ever lived.

I made a snap decision and continued inward, for now, shoving my way past old desks and enormous mountains of overgrown roots. Maybe I could lose her in here. Unfortunately, as I made my way inward, I heard water tendrils breaking through windows on the other side of the building. I scrambled out into a hallway and found water creeping toward me, running across the old carpet.

She was flooding the place.

She's trying to see, I realized. She could send water in through the windows and cover the floor of the entire office. She'd be able to see into any nook. I ran the other direction, trying to find a stairwell or another way out, and burst into another large office space. Here, translucent tentacles of water wove between the trunks of trees like the prehensile stalks of some enormous, many-eyed slug.

Heart beating more quickly, I ducked back into the hallway. Light shone behind me from fruit that had been knocked by the tentacles, sending dancing shadows down the hall. A disco for the damned.

My back to the wall, I realized I was trapped. I looked at the fruit next to me.

Worth a try.

"I could use some help, Dawnslight," I said.

Wait, was I praying now? This wasn't the same thing at all, was it?

Nothing happened.

"Uh …," I said. "This isn't a dream, by the way. Some help.

Please?”

The lights went out.

In an instant, the fruit just stopped glowing. I started, heart pounding. Without the glowing fruit, the place was as black as the inside of a can of black paint that had also been painted black. Despite the darkness, though, I heard the tendrils thrashing and coming close.

It looked like turning the lights out was the best Dawnslight could do for me. Desperate, I fumbled my way down the hallway in one last mad dash toward freedom.

The tendrils of water struck.

Right at the place where I’d been standing before.

I couldn’t see it, but I could feel them brush past me, converging on that location. I stumbled away, listening to the crash of water hitting wall, and fell back against one of them in the dark—a large, armlike glob of water, cold to the touch. I accidently put my hand into it, and my skin sank right through.

I pulled it out with a start and backed away, hitting another tendril. None of them stopped moving, but they didn’t come for me. I wasn’t crushed in the darkness.

She … can’t feel *with them*, I realized. *They don’t convey a sense of touch! So if she can’t see, she can’t direct them*.

Incredulous, I poked another of the tendrils in the darkness, then slapped it. Perhaps not the smartest thing I’d ever done, but it provoked no reaction. The tendrils continued thrashing about randomly.

I backed away, putting as much room between myself and those tendrils as possible. It wasn’t easy, as I kept stumbling over tree trunks. But …

Light?

A single fruit glowed up above. I chased it. It hung in front of a stairwell, and the floor here was dry. No water for Regalia to peer through.

“Thanks,” I said, stepping forward. My foot crunched something. A fortune cookie. I grabbed it and opened it.

She’s going to destroy the city, it read. *You don’t have much time left. Stop her!*

“Trying,” I muttered, squeezing between vines to climb into the stairwell and starting upward. Fruit glowed to light my way, then winked out behind me.

On the next level was a floor where all of the fruit glowed, but no water tendrils sought to capture me. Regalia didn't know where I'd gone. Excellent. I crept out into another office room. This floor was cultivated, to an extent, with carefully kept pathways and trees that had been trimmed into a garden. It was a striking sight, after the wildness of the other levels.

I started down a path, imagining the people who had decided to take this floor and make it their own personal garden, buried in the middle of a building. I was so captivated by the imagery I nearly missed the blinking fruit. It hung right in front of me and pulsed with a soft light.

A warning of some sort? Cautious, I continued forward, then heard a footstep on the path ahead.

My breath caught, and I ducked off the path and into the foliage. The fruit closest to me went out, making the area around me darker. A few moments later Newton strode down the path and passed right under the fruit that had pulsed.

She had her katana out resting on her shoulder, and she carried a cup of water.

A cup of water?

"This is a distraction," Newton said. "Unimportant."

"You'll do as told." Regalia's voice rose from the cup. "I heard him moving down there, but he's gone silent. He's hiding in the darkness, hoping we'll go away."

"I have to make it to the confrontation with the others," Newton protested. "Steelslayer is meaningless. If I don't fall into their trap, then how are you going to—"

"Obviously you're right," Regalia said.

Newton stopped in place.

"You are a wonderful help," Regalia continued. "So brilliant. And … Blast. I need to deal with Jonathan. Find that rat."

Newton cursed under her breath and continued on, leaving me behind. I shivered, waiting until I heard the door to the stairwell shut, then I stepped back out onto the path.

Regalia was worried enough about me to pull Newton away from other plans to hunt me. That seemed a very good sign. It meant she felt that keeping me from warning Prof was extremely important.

So I had to break through and reach him. Unfortunately, the moment I stepped out of this building, I'd be in the bull's-eye

again. I'd have to push through it, dodging as I had been before. I walked up to a window and prepared to leap out, but then found that my pocket was buzzing. I dug in it, pulling out the baggie, and removed the radio.

"Are you there? David, please answer!"

"I'm here, Mizzy," I said softly.

"Thank heavens," she said, tense. "David, you were *right*. Obliteration isn't here!"

"Are you sure?" I said, checking out the window.

"Yes! They've set up a kind of white mannequin thing with a floodlight right underneath it, so it glows like Obliteration. They then filled the rooftop with other powerful floodlights; that makes it seem like he's still here, but he isn't."

"That's why she wanted to keep everyone away," I said. Sparks. Obliteration was somewhere in the city, planning to destroy the entire place.

"I'm almost to Prof," I said. "Regalia keeps getting in my way. See if you can turn off the lights. That will warn the other Reckoners, assuming I don't make it."

"Okaaaay," Mizzy said. "I don't like this, David." She sounded scared.

"Good," I said back. "Means you aren't crazy. See what you can do. I'm going to make a final push toward Prof."

"Right."

I tucked the radio away, then glanced at a glowing fruit hanging nearby. "Thanks again for the help," I said. "If you have anything more like that to throw my way in the future, I wouldn't say no."

The fruit blinked.

I nodded grimly, then took a deep breath and jumped out the window.

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I got about two streets from the building before Regalia found me. She appeared on the surface of the water along my path, standing tall, her eyes wide and alight and her hands to the sides as if to hold up the sky. Waves rose around her like the peaks of a crown emerging from the water.

This time she didn't bother with conversation. Jets of water erupted beneath me. The first one clipped me along the side, slashing through both clothing and skin. I gasped in pain, then started weaving and bobbing, using the handjet to dodge to the side as Regalia sent an enormous ripple through the water that crested some fifteen feet high. It chased me around a corner but broke against a building as I landed on the roof and ran across it. I passed tents and screaming people and caught the scent of something odd in the air. Smoke?

I leaped off the other side of the building, and as I did, a blur zipped across the rooftop beside me. I yelped, cutting my jets and dropping just beneath the blur, which launched toward me, trailing an afterimage of neon red.

The blur passed right over my head, then landed on the building across from me, where it pulled to a stop, revealing Newton, katana in hand. She whipped out a handgun and spun in my direction.

Sparks! I should have been expecting her. I dove downward, passing the stories of a nearby building in a flash, and hit water as the popping noises of gunfire sounded above.

The water was an icy shock, jets propelling me face-first under the surface. Diving for the water had been my first instinct in order to avoid that gunfire, and it worked, as I didn't get shot.

But it did put me in Regalia's grasp.

The water around me began to constrict, to thicken, like syrup. I twisted, thrusting my feet downward, and engaged the spyril at full force.

It was as if the water had become tar, and each progressive inch of movement was harder than the inch before it. Bubbles grew trapped as I breathed them out, frozen like in Jell-O, and I felt the spyril shake violently on my back. Blackness surrounded me.

I didn't fear that blackness any longer. I'd looked it in the eye. My lungs strained, but I shoved down the panic.

I broke the surface. Once my arms were free, the spyril thrust me out into the air with a triumphant jet, but tendrils of water waited for me. They wrapped around my legs.

I pointed the streambeam of the spyril right at them.

My machine sucked up those tendrils like it did any other water, spraying them out the jets at the bottom and freeing me in a heartbeat. I burst higher into the air, dazed from lack of oxygen. I reached a rooftop and let the jets cut out, rolling across it, breathing deeply.

Okay, I thought, *no more going underwater with Regalia around*.

I'd barely caught my breath when water tendrils climbed up over the roof, like the fingers of an enormous beast. Newton landed near me in a blur, trailing glowing color from her hair. She came right at me, fast as an eyeblink, and all I could do was engage the spyril, my streambeam pointed right at one of Regalia's tendrils.

The sudden jet of power lurched me across the rooftop away from Newton. Just barely. Worse, only one of the footjets engaged. I didn't know if it was the constriction down below, the tendrils that had grabbed me after, or the rough landing. But the machine had always been finicky, and it had chosen this moment to finick.

Newton moved past me, her sword striking the ground where I'd just been lying, throwing up sparks. She reached the side of the rooftop, where another building rose up alongside this one, no space between. There she stopped.

And, from what I saw, stopping was pretty dramatic. Best I could tell, she came out of her super-speed run by throwing one hand up against the wall of the building next door. All of her

momentum was transferred to the structure and, in the bizarre way of Epics, completely scrambled the laws of physics. The wall exploded into a spray of dust and crumbling bricks.

She turned around, dropping her sword—now jagged and broken—and reached to her side, slipping another one out of a sheath at her waist. She spun the sword, regarding me, and walked forward more casually. Around us, Regalia's tendrils continued surrounding the entire building, creeping up over the sky, making a dome. This small rooftop was abandoned, and its painted graffiti reflected off the water around us. Liquid began to pour in over the lip of the roof, flooding it with an inch or two of water, and Regalia took shape from it beside Newton.

I pulled out my gun and fired. I knew it was pointless, but I had to try something, and the spyril just sputtered when I engaged it—both jets refusing to spit anything out now. The bullets bounced off Newton, reflected out toward the closing dome of water, making little splashes. Newton leaned down, one hand on the ground, preparing to sprint, but Regalia raised a hand and stopped her.

"I want to know," she said to me, "what you did earlier."

My heart thumping, I scrambled to my feet and glanced to the side, looking for a way out. Regalia's dome of water completely encased the rooftop, and new tendrils were rising from the flooded roof to try to snatch me. Desperate, I pointed the streambeam at one and tried to engage the spyril. The jets at my feet wouldn't work.

But, to my relief, the handjet did. I was able to slurp up the tendril and shoot it the other way. I got the next, then the next, then started shooting them at Newton as I hopped backward. My attack just splashed away from her, but she seemed to find it annoying.

More and more tendrils came for me, but I sucked each one up, jetting them outward.

"Stop *doing* that!" Regalia roared, voice booming. A hundred tendrils grew up, far more than I could target.

Then they immediately started to shrink.

I blinked at them, then looked at Regalia, who seemed as baffled as I was. Something else was coming up out of the water around me. Plants?

It was roots. *Tree* roots. They grew wickedly fast around us,

sucking in the water, draining it from every source it could find, feeding upon it. Dawnslight was watching. I looked back at Regalia and grinned.

"The child is acting up again," Regalia said with a sigh, crossing her arms and looking at Newton. "End this."

In an instant Newton became a blur.

I couldn't outrun her. I couldn't hurt her.

All I could do was gamble.

"You're beautiful, Newton," I yelled.

The blur became a person again, plants curling up at her feet. Her lips pursed, she looked at me, eyes wide, sword held in limp fingers.

"You're a wonderful Epic," I continued, raising my gun.

She backed away.

"Obviously," I said, "that's why both Obliteration and Regalia are always sure to compliment you. It couldn't, of course, be because compliments are your weakness." That was why Newton let her gang be so rowdy and insubordinate. She hadn't wanted them complimenting her by accident.

Newton turned and ran.

I shot her in the back.

It wrenched my gut as she fell face-first to the overgrown ground. But at my core, I was an assassin. Yes, I killed in the name of justice, bringing down only those who deserved it, but at the end of the day, I *was* an assassin. I'd shoot someone in the back. Whatever it took.

I walked up, then planted two more bullets in her skull, just to be certain.

I looked at Regalia, who stood, arms still crossed, among the growing flora around us—saplings becoming full trees, fruit sprouting, swelling, and sagging from limbs and vines. Her figure started to shrink as Dawnslight drank up the water that formed her current projection, and her dome fell apart, showering down upon me and the rooftop.

"I see that I spoke too freely when punishing Newton," Regalia said. "This is my fault, for giving away her weakness. You really *are* an annoyance, boy."

I raised the handgun and pointed it at Regalia's head.

"Oh please," she said. "You know you can't hurt me with that."

"I'm coming for you," I said softly. "I'm going to kill you before

you kill Prof."

"Is that so?" Regalia snapped. "And do you realize that while you've been distracted, the Reckoners have already executed their plan? That your idolized Jonathan Phaedrus has killed the woman you love?"

A shock ran through me.

"He used her as bait, to draw me," Regalia said. "Noble Jonathan murdered her in an attempt to make me appear. And I did, of course. So that he'd have his little data point. His team is storming my supposed sanctuary right now."

"You're lying."

"Oh?" Regalia said. "And what is that you smell?"

I'd smelled it earlier. With an edge of panic, I ran to the side of the building and looked toward something I could barely make out against the darkness. A column of smoke rising from a nearby building—the place where Mizzy said Prof had been waiting.

Fire.

Megan!

47

REGALIA let me go. That probably should have worried me more than it did.

I focused only on reaching that building. I fiddled with the leg wires on the spyril and managed to get one of the jets working. That let me awkwardly cross the gaps between rooftops. I landed on a building next to the one belching the column of smoke, and heat blasted me despite the distance. The fire was burning from the lower floors upward. The roof itself wasn't yet consumed, but the lower floors were engulfed. It seemed like the entire structure was close to collapsing.

Frantic, I looked down at the glove of my handjet. Might it be enough? I jetted across to the rooftop, where the heat was actually less intense than it had been when facing the burning lower floors. Sweating, I sprinted across the roof and found a stairwell access door.

I shoved it open. Smoke billowed out, and I got a lungful. Driven back by the heat, I stumbled away, coughing. I squeezed tears from my eyes at the smoke and looked at the spyril strapped to my arm. Thoughts of using the spyril like a fireman's hose seemed silly now. There was no way I could get close enough, and there wouldn't be water inside the building anyway.

"She's dead," a quiet voice said.

I started, jumping to the side and reaching for Mizzy's handgun. Prof sat on the side of the rooftop, shadowed by the little stairwell shack so that I hadn't seen him at first.

"Prof?" I asked, uncertain.

"She came to save you," he said softly. He was slumped down, a shadowy mountain of a man in the gloom. No neon glowed

near here. “I sent her a dozen messages with your phone, made it seem like you were in danger. She came. Even though I’d already started the fire, she broke into the building, thinking you were trapped inside. She ran, coughing and blind, to the room where she thought you lay trapped and pinned under a fallen tree. I caught her, took away her weapons, and left her in there with forcefields on the doorways and the window.”

“Please, no …,” I whispered. I couldn’t think. It wasn’t possible.

“Just her alone in the room,” Prof continued. He held something in his hand. Megan’s handgun, the one I’d given back to her. “Water on the floor. I needed Regalia to see. I was sure she’d come. And she did—but only to laugh at me.”

“Megan’s still down there!” I said. “In what room?”

“Two floors down, but she’s dead, David. She has to be. Too much fire. I think …” He seemed dazed. “I must have been wrong about her all along. And you were right. Her illusions broke apart, you see.…”

“Prof,” I said, grabbing him. “We have to go for her. *Please*.”

“I can hold it back, can’t I?” Prof said. He looked to me, and his face seemed too shadowed; only his eyes glittered, reflecting starlight. He seized me by the arms. “Take some of it. Take it away from me, so I can’t use it!”

I felt a tingling sensation wash through me. Prof, gifting me some of his powers.

“Jon!” Tia’s voice barked from the mobile on his shoulder, where he’d strapped it, apparently eschewing an earpiece. “Jon, it’s Mizzy.… Jon, she’s got the camera that was watching Obliteration, and she’s been writing messages on paper and holding them up for us to see. She says Obliteration isn’t there.”

Clever, Mizzy, I thought.

“No, that’s because he’s *here*,” Val’s voice said over the line. “Prof, you’ve got to see this. We’ve swept Regalia’s base at Building C. She’s nowhere to be seen, but there’s something else. Obliteration, we think. At least, *something* is glowing in here, and glowing powerfully. This looks bad.…”

Prof looked to me, then seemed to grow stronger. “I’m coming,” he said to them. “Hold that building.”

“Yes sir,” Val said.

Prof darted away, a forcefield forming to make a bridge for him from this building to the next.

“It’s all wrong, Prof,” I called after him. “Regalia isn’t bound by the limits you thought she was. She knows all about the plan. Whatever Val just found, it’s a trap. For you.”

He stopped at the edge of the rooftop. Smoke billowed out of the building around us, so thick it was growing hard for me to breathe. But for some reason, the heat seemed to have lessened.

“That sounds like her,” Prof said, his voice trailing back to me in the night.

“So …”

“So if Obliteration is really there,” he said, “I have to stop him. I will simply need to find a way to survive the trap.” Prof charged across his forcefield, leaving me.

I sat down, drained, numb. Megan’s handgun lay on the ground before me. I picked it up. Megan … I’d been too late. I’d failed. And I still didn’t know what Regalia’s trap entailed.

So what? a piece of me said. *You give up?*

When had I ever done that?

I shouted, standing up and charging toward the stairwell down. I didn’t care about the heat, though I assumed it would drive me back. Only it didn’t. It felt practically cold in the stairwell.

Prof’s forcefield, I realized, driving myself onward. *He just gifted one to me*. One had protected me against Obliteration’s heat. It would work just as well against this fire, it appeared.

I kept my head down, breath held, but eventually had to suck in some air. I muffled my mouth and nose with my T-shirt, which was soaked from the fight with Regalia, and it seemed to work. Either that, or Prof’s forcefield kept the smoke away from me. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure how they worked, even still.

Two floors down, where Prof said he’d left Megan, I entered a place alight with fire. Violent flames created an alien illumination. It was a place a man like me wasn’t supposed to go.

I gritted my teeth and pushed forward, trusting in Prof’s forcefield. Part of me, deep inside, panicked at the sight of all this fire—walls burned from floor to ceiling and flames dripped down from above, Dawnslight’s trees engulfed in orange. There was no way I could survive this, could I? Prof’s forcefields were never a hundred percent effective when given to someone else.

I was too worried about Megan, too desperate and shaken, to stop moving. I shoved my way through a burning door, charred wood breaking around me. I stumbled past a hole in the floor, my

arm up warding against the heat I could not feel. Everything was so *bright*. I could barely see in here.

I took in a breath but felt no pain from the heat. The forcefield wouldn't cool the air as I drew it in. Why wasn't I burning my throat with each breath? Sparks! Nothing made sense.

Megan. Where was *Megan*?

I stumbled through another doorway and saw a body on the floor, in the middle of a burned rug.

I cried out and ran to it, kneeling, cradling the half-burned figure, tipping the charred head to see a familiar face. It was her. I screamed, looking at the dead eyes, the burned flesh, and pulled the limp body close.

I knelt in the inferno of hell itself, the world dying around me, and knew I had failed.

My jacket was burning, and my skin was darkening from the flames. Sparks. It was killing me too. Why couldn't I feel it?

Crying, reckless, I grabbed Megan's body and blinked away the horrid light of fire and smoke. I stumbled to my feet and looked toward a window. The glass was melting from the heat, but there was no sign of a forcefield—Prof must have already dismissed the forcefields surrounding the room. With a yell, I ran for the window, holding her, and crashed out into the cold night air.

I fell a short distance before engaging the spyril. The single jet I had fixed still worked, fortunately, and slowed my fall until I was hovering in the air outside the burning building, holding Megan's corpse, water jetting beneath me and smoke breaking around me. Slowly, on a single jet, I raised us to the next building over and landed before setting Megan down.

Charred flakes of blackened skin fell from my arms, revealing pink flesh beneath—which immediately became a healthy tan. I blinked at it, then suddenly realized why I hadn't felt pain, and why I'd been able to breathe in the heated air. Prof hadn't just given me a forcefield, he'd gifted me some of his healing powers as well. I touched my scalp and found that though my hair had burned away, it was growing back—Prof's healing power restoring me to the way I had been before entering the inferno.

So I was safe. But what did it matter? Megan was still dead. I knelt above her, feeling helpless and alone, broken inside. I'd worked so hard, and I'd still failed.

Overwhelmed, I bowed my head. Maybe … maybe she'd lied

about her weakness. She'd be okay then, right? I touched her face, turning it. Half of it was burned, but when I nudged her head to the side, I could ignore the burned part. The other side looked barely singed. Just a little ash on the cheek. Beautiful, like she was just sleeping.

Tears leaking down the sides of my face, I took her hand. "No," I whispered. "I watched you die once. I don't believe it happened again. Do you hear me? You aren't dead. Or … you're coming back. That's it. Do you have that recording going like last time? Because if you do, I want you to know. I believe in you. I don't think …"

I trailed off.

If she came back, it meant she'd lied to me about her weakness. I wanted that to be true, desperately, because I wanted her to be alive. But at the same time, if she'd lied about her weakness, what did that mean? I hadn't demanded it, hadn't wanted it, but she'd given it to me—so it seemed something sacred.

If she'd lied to me about her weakness, then I knew I wouldn't be able to trust anything else she said. So, one way or another, Megan was lost to me.

I wiped tears from my chin, then reached out one last time to take her hand in mine. The back of the hand was burned, but not too badly, yet her fingers were stuck together in a fist. It was almost like … she was clutching something?

I frowned, prying her fingers apart. Indeed, her palm held a small object that had been melted to her sleeve: a small remote control. *What in Calamity's light?* I held it up. It looked like the little remotes that came with car keys. It had melted at the bottom but looked to be in good shape otherwise. I hit the button.

Something sounded from just beneath me. A faint clicking noise, followed by some odd cracks.

I stared at the control for a long moment, then scrambled to my feet and ran to the side of the building. I pushed the button again. There. Was that … gunfire? Suppressed gunfire?

I lowered myself with the spyril to a window two stories down. There, set up in the shadows of a window, was the Gottschalk, sleek and black, with suppressor on the end of the muzzle. I moved to the side and pushed the button. It fired remotely, pelting the wall of the burning building with bullets.

It was firing into the room where Megan had been.

"You sly woman," I said, snatching the gun. I raised myself on a jet of water and ran back to her body and rolled it over. The heat had dried the blood, darkened the skin, but I could make out the bullet holes.

Never had I been so happy to see that someone had been shot. "You set it up so you could shoot yourself," I whispered, "in case things went bad. So you'd reincarnate, rather than risking death by fire. Sparks, you're *brilliant*!"

Emotion flooded me. Relief, exultation, amazement. Megan was the most awesome, most clever, most *incredible* person ever. If she'd died by bullets, she *was* coming back! In the morning, if what she said about her reincarnation timing was true.

I touched her face, but this … this was just a husk now. Megan, *my* Megan, would return. Grinning, I grabbed the Gottschalk and stood up. It felt good to have a solid rifle in my hands once again.

"You," I said to the gun, "are officially *off* probation."

Megan had survived. In the face of that, anything else seemed possible.

I could still save this city.

48

“MIZZY,” I said, holding the walkie-talkie to my ear as I ran in the direction Prof had gone. “Does this stupid thing still work?”

“Yup,” came the reply.

“Clever move, using the camera to get a message to Tia.”

“She saw?” Mizzy said with an exuberant perkiness that seemed a distinct contrast to the agony I’d been through a few moments ago.

“Yeah,” I said, charging across a bridge. “I overheard a message from Tia to Prof. That might get him to scrap the mission.”

Unlikely. But it was possible.

“You found Prof?” Mizzy asked. “What happened?”

“Too much to explain,” I told her. “They say they stormed Regalia’s supposed base—Building C, on Tia’s map—and found Obliteration glowing inside. I’m sure it’s some kind of trap.”

“That’s not Obliteration they found.”

“What? Val said she’d found him.”

“He appeared back here just after I knocked out the lights,” Mizzy said. “Nearly gave me a heart attack. Didn’t seem to notice me hiding, though. Anyway, he wasn’t glowing at all, but I got a goooood look at him. Whatever Val found, it isn’t Obliteration.”

“Sparks,” I said, trying to push myself faster. “Then what is Prof walking into?”

“You’re asking me?” Mizzy said.

“Just thinking out loud. I’m heading uptown. Can you get here? I might need fire support.”

“Already on my way,” Mizzy said, “but I’m pretty far. Any sign of Newton your direction?”

“Newton’s dead,” I said. “I managed to guess her weakness.”

"*Wow*," Mizzy said. "Another one? You're *really* making the rest of us look bad. I mean, dude, *I* couldn't even shoot an unarmed, powerless enemy who fell in my lap."

"Call me if you spot Obliteration," I said, then stuffed the radio back in its bag and into my jeans pocket. My jacket was basically ruined—I'd ripped it off and left it behind—and even my jeans were ragged, burned up one side. Worse, the spyril was in shambles. I'd lost the cords on one half entirely. The other half sputtered when I used it, and I didn't know how long I'd trust it to hold me.

I passed a rooftop, noting the number of people crowded into the jungle of a building nearby, who peered out through the windows and hid beneath fronds. My confrontation with Regalia had been pretty blatant. Even the relaxed Babilarans knew to take cover after something like that.

Trusting my memory of Tia's maps, I continued right across a particularly ratty bridge. I had a ways to go before getting to the base, unfortunately. I ran for a short time until my path took me across a strange rooftop that consisted of a large square balcony running around the outside, with a big structure in the middle. Here I had to slow, as people had built awnings above the balcony, and the space underneath the awnings was crowded with junk. The people here hadn't been near enough to my fighting to be afraid, so they just lounged there enjoying the night, reluctantly making room for me.

As I drew near to the other side, one particularly oblivious Babilaran stood right in the pathway. "Excuse me," I said, leaping over a lawn chair. "Coming through."

He didn't move, though he did turn to me. Only then did I see that he was wearing a long trench coat, face bearing a goatee and spectacles.

Uh …

"And I looked," Obliteration said, "and beheld a pale horse. On him was Death, and Hell followed with him. Power was given unto them to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death."

I stumbled to a halt, unslinging my rifle.

"Do you deny," Obliteration whispered, "that this is the end of the world, slayer of angels?"

"I don't know what it is," I said, "but I figure that if God really wanted to end the world, he'd be a little more efficient about it

than all of this."

Obliteration actually smiled, as if he appreciated the humor. Frost began to crust the area around him as he drew in heat, but I pulled the trigger before he could release the burst of destruction.

He vanished while my finger was still on the trigger, exploding into a glowing afterimage. I spun around, catching him as he teleported behind me. This time he looked surprised as I shot him.

As his form exploded for the second time, I threw myself off the side of the building and thrust my hand downward. Thankfully, the spyril jet worked, slowing me. I used its stream to push myself into the building through a broken window, where I ducked down and froze.

I didn't have time to deal with Obliteration right now. Getting to Prof and the team was more important. I—

Before I could form my next thought, Obliteration exploded into existence beside me. "I read John the Evangelist's account a dozen times before destroying Houston," he said to me.

I yelped and shot him. He vanished, then appeared on the other side of me.

"I wondered which of his horsemen I was, but the answer was more subtle than that. I read the account too literally. There are not four horsemen; it is a metaphor." He met my gaze. "We have been released, the ones who destroy, the swords of heaven itself. We are the end."

I shot him, but he discharged a burst of heat so powerful that it overwhelmed Prof's forcefield. I gasped and the bullet I'd fired melted away. I threw up my arm as the ground vaporized, then the wall, and then half my body.

For a moment, I was *not*.

Then my skin grew back, the bone re-formed, and my train of thought started again. It was as if I'd skipped a beat in time, just a fraction of a moment. I was left breathing deeply, sitting on the blackened floor of the room.

Obliteration cocked his head at me and frowned. Then he vanished. I rolled and fell out the window before he could return, engaging the broken spyril to stop me from dropping into the water below.

Sparks! The blast had vaporized the handjet, along with … well, half my body. I still had the streambeam, Megan's

pistol, and my rifle—and fortunately, the single jet on my foot worked as I engaged it. But my jeans were completely missing one leg, and there was no sign of the broken half of the spyril.

Without the handjet, I couldn't maneuver. I launched myself down the street to another building and made it into a window—this one had mostly been unbroken, and crashing through it left gashes on my skin.

The wounds healed, but not as quickly as before. Things, I realized, were about to get very dangerous. When Prof granted us power via our jackets, it ran out after taking a few hits. He'd given me a big dump of healing ability, but it seemed I was reaching the limits. Not good.

I ran through the building and pulled up in a hallway. Back to a wall, I let out a huge breath.

Obliteration exploded into existence just inside the window I'd broken through. I caught sight of him, but ducked back down the hallway before he spotted me.

"And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering," Obliteration called, "and laid it upon Isaac his son. He took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and they went both of them together…."

I felt sweat trickle down the sides of my face as Obliteration stepped into the hallway and spotted me. I pulled around the corner, out of his sight.

"Why are you working with Regalia?" I called out, my back to the wall. "You congratulated me for destroying Steelheart. She's just as bad."

"And so I will end her eventually," Obliteration said. "It is part of our arrangement."

"She'll betray you."

"Likely," Obliteration agreed. "But she has given me knowledge and power. She has taken a piece of my soul, and it lives on without me. And so, I become the seeds of the end of time itself." He paused. "She had not warned me that she had persuaded the archangel to grant you a portion of his glory."

"You can't kill me," I called, glancing down the hallway at him. "There's no reason to try."

He smiled and frost crept forward down the darkened hallway, reaching like fingers toward me, freezing a fruit that hung from a vine like a single lightbulb above. "Oh," Obliteration continued,

“I think that you’ll find a man can do many things thought impossible, if he tries hard enough.”

I had to deal with him. Quickly. I made a snap decision and withdrew the suppressor on the front of my gun. Then I ducked around the corner and shot him, making him vanish. I tossed my gun into a side room and ran the other direction. A moment later I held down the button on the remote, triggering the rifle to fire in the room.

I charged through the building to a window on the other side and ducked out onto a balcony. I turned, pressing my back against the wall, and hit the remote again, firing the gun while digging Megan’s handgun out of my pocket with my other hand.

Cursing filtered out from inside the building. Obliteration must have found the gun and not me. Now, if I could just get out of here …

Suddenly he was on the balcony beside me, letting out a wave of heat.

Damn it! I aimed and shot him with Megan’s gun to make him vanish. It worked, though I was left with charred skin.

I clenched my teeth against the pain. With the healing coming more slowly, I had time to feel the pain.

I checked Megan’s gun. Two bullets left.

What I couldn’t figure out was how he was finding me. It had happened before; he seemed to be able to track us somehow. Did he have some kind of visionary power? How did he teleport away, then know exactly where to teleport back to find me?

Then it clicked.

I turned just as Obliteration appeared beside me again. He was shouting scripture and glowing with power. I didn’t shoot him.

This time, I grabbed him.

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IT was something I could never have managed without Prof's powers. The heat was incredible and threatened to set me ablaze. Obliteration's surprise, however, worked to my advantage as I raised the pistol and shot him in the head.

He teleported.

I held tight, and he took me with him.

We appeared in a dark, windowless room, and Obliteration immediately turned off his heat. He did it so quickly, it had to be something he'd trained himself to do by reflex. Wherever we were, he couldn't destroy this place. I let go but grabbed his glasses, ripping them free as I fell backward.

Obliteration cursed, his normally calm demeanor breaking down in his outrage at being tricked. I backed away, throwing myself against the wall of the dark room. I couldn't make out much, though the pain of the burns he'd given me made it difficult to pay attention to anything else. I'd dropped the gun, but gripped the spectacles tightly with my other hand.

He pulled his sword from beneath his trench coat and looked toward me. Sparks! He could obviously see well enough without the glasses to find me.

"All you have done," he said, walking toward me, "is box yourself in with me."

"What nightmares do you have, Obliteration?" I asked, slumped against the wall. Prof's healing powers were working very, very slowly now. Gradually the feeling in my hands was returning, first as a tingling, then as sharp pinpricks. I gasped and blinked against the pain.

Obliteration had stopped advancing on me. He lowered his

sword, the tip touching the floor. “And how,” he said, “do you know of my nightmares?”

“All Epics have them,” I said. I was far from certain about this, but what did I have to lose? “Your fears drive you, Obliteration. And they reveal your weakness.”

“I dream of it because it will someday kill me,” he said softly.

“Or is it your weakness because you dream of it?” I asked. “Newton probably feared being good enough because of her family’s expectations. Sourcefield feared the stories of cults, and the poison her grandmother had tried to give her. Both had nightmares.”

“And the angel of God spake unto me in a dream,” Obliteration whispered. “And I said, Here am I.… So that is the answer.” He threw his head back and laughed.

The pain in my hands only seemed to be getting worse. I let out a whimper despite myself. I was basically an invalid.

Obliteration rushed to me, kneeling, taking me by the shoulders—which were now bare, and burned. Pain flared and I cried out.

“Thank you,” Obliteration whispered. “For the secret. Give my … regards to Regalia.”

He let go, bowed his head to me, and exploded into a flash of light and ceramic.

I blinked, then curled up on the floor and trembled. Sparks! Earlier the healing had happened so quickly that it had felt refreshing, like a cool breeze. Now it happened at the speed of a drop of rain rolling down a cold pane of glass.

It seemed like an eternity that I sat there suffering the pain, but it was probably only three or four minutes. Eventually the agony subsided and, groaning, I climbed to my feet. I flexed my fingers and squeezed them into fists. My hands worked, though my skin stung as if I had a bad sunburn. That didn’t seem to be going away. The blessing that Prof had given me was no more.

I stepped forward and kicked something with my foot. Obliteration’s sword. I picked it up, but all I found of Megan’s gun was a melted piece of slag.

She was going to kill me for that.

Well, Obliteration obviously had enough control over his powers to not melt objects he preferred to keep intact. I clutched the sword as I felt my way through the small dark room to a

door. I opened it; beyond was a narrow wooden stairway, framed by banisters on both walls. From what light there was I could see that I'd been in some kind of small supply room. My clothes had basically been vaporized. All I had left was Abraham's pendant, which still hung around my neck, one side of the chain melted. I pulled it off, worried that the melted chain would snap.

I found a length of cloth—it looked like it could have once been curtains—and wrapped it around myself. Then, holding the sword in one hand, pendant in the other, I climbed the stairs slowly, step after step. As I ascended the light grew brighter, and I began to make out odd decorations on the walls.

… Posters?

Yes, posters. Old ones, from the decades before Calamity. Bright, vibrant colors, women in ruffled skirts, sweaters that exposed a shoulder. Neon on black. The posters had faded over time, but I could see they'd been hung meticulously back in the day. I stopped beside one in that silent stairwell. It showed a pair of hands holding a glowing fruit, a band's name emblazoned at the bottom.

Where *was* I?

I looked up toward the light at the top of the stairs. Sweating, I continued to climb until I came to the top and to a door with a chair next to it. The door was cracked open, and I pushed it farther, revealing a small, neat bedroom decorated like the stairwell with posters on the walls, proclaiming a glorified urban life.

Two hospital-style beds lay in the room, out of place, with steel frames and sterile white sheets. One held a sleeping man in his thirties or forties hooked up with all kinds of tubes and wires. The other held a small wizened woman with a tub of water next to her.

Another woman wearing medical scrubs stood over this patient. As soon as I entered, the doctor looked at me and gave a little start, then walked out the way I had come in. The only sounds were those of the heart rate monitors. I stepped forward, hesitant, feeling an uncanny, surreal sensation. The aged woman, obviously Regalia, was awake and staring at something on the wall. As I entered, I noted three very large television screens.

On the center one, Prof, Val, and Exel stood just inside a room glowing so brightly I could barely make them out.

“So,” Regalia said. “You’ve found me.”

I looked to the side. A figure of her as I knew her had appeared from the tub of water. I looked back at the woman in the bed. She was far, far older than her projected self. And far more sickly. The real Regalia there breathed in and out with the help of a respirator and didn’t say anything.

“How did you get here?” the projection asked.

“Obliteration,” I said quietly. “He located me too easily each time I hid from him. I realized that he had to teleport somewhere when he vanished. It stood to reason that he was coming to you and getting instructions on where to go. He can’t see everything in the city, but *you* can.” I looked at the television screens. “At least, everywhere with water.” She’d set these up so she could watch other places, obviously.

But why? What was going on in that room with Prof, Val, and Exel? I looked back at Regalia.

The projection glanced at the elderly figure in bed. “It is frustrating that we still age,” she said. “What is the point of divine power if your body gives out?” She shook her head as if disgusted at herself.

I slowly moved through the room, trying to figure out what to do next. I had her, right? Of course, she had that tub of water, so she wasn’t entirely defenseless.

I stopped next to the other bed, the one with the man I didn’t recognize. I glanced down at him and noted the blanket—like a child’s blanket—draped around his shoulders. It depicted fanciful trees and glowing fruit. “Dawnslight?” I asked Regalia.

“Why Calamity would choose a man in a coma to grant powers to, I have no idea,” Regalia said. “The Destroying Angel’s decisions often make so little sense to me.”

“He’s been like that for a long time, then?”

“Since his childhood,” Regalia said. “With his powers, he seems aware of the world around him at times. The rest of the time, he dreams. Trapped forever in his childhood some thirty years ago …”

“And this city becomes his dream,” I realized. “A city of bright colors, fanciful paints, of perpetual warmth and gardens inside buildings. A child’s wonder.” I thought quickly, trying to put the pieces together. Why? What did it mean? And how could I stop Regalia?

Did I need to? I looked at the aged figure, so frail. She barely seemed alive. “You’re dying,” I guessed.

“Cancer,” Regalia’s projection said with a nod. “I’ve got a few weeks left. If I’m lucky.”

“Why worry about Prof, then?” I asked, confused. “If you know you’re going to die, why go through so much effort to kill him?”

Regalia didn’t reply. While her real body rasped in the background, the projection folded her hands in front of herself and regarded the center screen. Prof stepped forward in the blaze of light. He too carried a sword, one of the types he fashioned for himself by using his tensor power. And he’d dared make fun of Obliteration for carrying one.

He strode through the light, holding a hand before himself like he was fighting against the flow of some powerful stream. What should I do? Regalia didn’t seem to care that I was here—Sparks, she probably didn’t care if I killed her or not. She was practically dead anyway.

Could I threaten her? Somehow force her not to harm Prof? The thought not only nauseated me, but looking at her frail body, I doubted I could so much as touch her without provoking some kind of terminal reaction.

The screen dimmed suddenly; the real Regalia was tapping something on her armrest, a control of some sort. It darkened the screen, adding some kind of filter to cut through the glare. It allowed me to see what Prof couldn’t, because the room he was in was so bright.

The source of the glow wasn’t a person as I had suspected. It was a box with wires coming from it.

What in the world? I was so confused I just stared at the screen.

“Did you know,” Regalia’s projection said, “that Jonathan is not so unique as he assumes? Yes, he can give away his powers. But every Epic can do that, under the right circumstances. All it takes is a bit of their DNA and the right machinery.”

They cut something outta him, Dawnslight had said. Obliteration, with bandages …

A bit of DNA and the right machinery …

A mounting horror grew within me. “You created a machine that replicates Obliteration’s powers. Like the spyril, only capable of blowing up cities! You used an Epic … to create a *bomb*.”

“I’ve been experimenting with this,” Regalia’s projection said,

arms crossed. “The Angel of the Apocalypse is … unreasonable to work with sometimes, and I have needed my own methods for transferring powers.”

On the screen, Prof had reached the device. He touched it, then drew back, confused. I could barely make out Val and Exel behind him in the room, their hands thrown up against the light.

“Please,” I said, looking to Regalia. I advanced on her with my sword. “Don’t hurt him. He was your *friend*, Abigail.”

“You keep implying I want to kill Jonathan,” Regalia said. “Such a terrible assumption.” The real her pushed a button on her armrest.

On the television screen, the bomb exploded. It erupted like an opening flower—a wave of destructive energy so powerful it would annihilate Babilar entirely. I watched it bloom, radiate outward.

Then stop.

Prof stood with hands upraised like a man gripping some enormous beast, a silhouette against the red light. A sun appeared right there in the center of the room, and he *held* it. He contained it with such tension to his body that I felt as if I could feel him straining, working to hold it all in, not let a single bit escape.

Such *power*. This bomb had been charging for quite some time, it seemed. Regalia could have pulled the trigger and vaporized Babilar weeks ago.

Prof roared, a primal and terrible shout, but he held on to that energy. And then he created something enormous, a shield of vibrant blue that ripped open the roof of the room they were in like two hands and created a column of fire into the sky. He let the energy out, siphoning it away harmlessly into the air.

I knew, with rising horror, it wouldn’t be enough. Oh, he might save the city, but it still wouldn’t be enough. The corruption grew hand in hand with the amount of power expended. Even if I was right, and he’d be able to control it in small amounts, he’d never be able to handle so much at once.

Prof used his powers as I’d never seen him use them, on a level like Steelheart had used when transforming Newcago to metal. This was an act of inhuman preservation, proof that a hero had come. It was also a condemnation. He’d been on the edge before. Now this …

“Too much,” I whispered. “Far too much. Prof …”

“I didn’t lure Jonathan here to kill him, child,” Regalia whispered from behind me. “I did it because I need a successor.”

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"WHAT have you done?" I screamed at Regalia. I spun and rushed to the bedside, ignoring the projection. I seized the aged woman by the front of her gown with one hand, pulling her up toward me. "What *have you done*?"

She breathed in, then spoke with her own voice for the first time, rasping, feeble. "I have made him strong."

I looked back at the screen. Prof dispersed the last of the energy and fell to his knees. The room grew dark, and I realized the filter was still on. I dropped the sword and fiddled with the buttons on the side of Regalia's bed, trying to bring the light back up on the monitor so I could see what was happening.

The screen returned to normal. Prof was kneeling in the room, his back to us. Before him, the floor ended in a perfect circle, vaporized in the release of power. A trembling figure walked up to him from behind. Val. She reached him and hesitantly put a hand on his shoulder.

He raised an open palm to the side, not looking. A forcefield surrounded Val. Prof squeezed his palm shut into a fist. The forcefield collapsed to the size of a basketball, Val still inside. In a heartbeat, she was snuffed out, ended.

"No!" I screamed, scrambling back in horror at the awful sight. "No, Prof …"

"He'll kill the Reckoners quickly," Regalia's projection said softly, almost in regret. "A High Epic's first move is usually to remove those who knew him best. They are the ones most likely to be able to find his weakness."

I shook my head, appalled. It couldn't … I mean …

Prof swung his hand out. I heard Exel shout. His voice cut off

mid-phrase.

No …

Prof stood up and turned, and finally I could see his face, twisted, shadowed, marred by hatred and anger, teeth pulled together, jaw clenched.

I didn't know this man any longer.

Mizzy. Tia. I had to do something! I—

Regalia was coughing. She managed to do it triumphantly. Growling, I seized the sword and raised it over her. "You monster!"

"It was … coming …," she said between coughs. "He … would have let it … out … eventually."

"No!" My arms trembled. I shouted, then brought the blade down.

And killed my second High Epic for the day.

I stumbled back from the bed, blood spreading onto the white sheets, some of it staining my arms. On the screen, Prof walked lethargically past Val's remains. Then he stopped. A piece of the wall in his room had opened up, showing a series of monitors like the ones in this room.

One showed a map of Babilar with a circle on it. A place out in New Jersey—this house? It seemed likely, as the other screen in front of him flickered, then showed a shot of the room I was in. Regalia dead in her bed. Me, standing with bloody arms, wrapped in a cloth at my waist.

I looked up at the corner of my room and saw for the first time a video camera there. Regalia had set all of this up so she would be able to confront him after what he'd done. It seemed … it seemed she'd wanted him to come to her.

Prof looked me over in the screen.

"Prof …," I said, and my voice sounded in his room, across the city. "Please …"

Prof turned from the monitor and strode from the room. In that moment I knew. It wasn't Tia or Mizzy I needed to worry about protecting. Neither of them had ever killed a High Epic.

I had.

And so he was coming for me.

51

“DAWNSLIGHT?” I said, shaking the slumbering figure in the other bed.

He didn’t move. Coma. Right.

“I could use some help again,” I said to him, but of course I got no response.

Sparks! Prof was coming. I left the room in a mad scramble, passing the doctor who, without comment, rose from her chair by the door and hurried back in, perhaps to gather her things and make a hasty exit.

Smart.

Prof had … *killed* Val and Exel without a second thought. He’d do the same to me. I hurried through the building, looking for the way out onto the street. What was that low, rumbling sound I heard in the distance?

I’d leave the building and find a place to hide. But … could I really hide from Jonathan Phaedrus? I had no resources, no contacts. If I hid, he’d find me. If I fled, I’d spend the rest of my life—probably a short life—running.

When he got here, he might very well kill Dawnslight, and in so doing, destroy Babilar. No more food. No more light.

I stopped in the living room, panting. Running did no good. I would need to face Prof eventually.

I’d do it now.

So, despite every instinct screaming at me to hide, I turned and looked for a way up onto the roof. The place was a suburban home that was surprisingly well maintained. What had happened to Dawnslight’s family? Were they out there somewhere, worried over their dreaming son?

I finally found the stairs and climbed up to the third floor. From there I climbed out of a window onto the roof. Unlike most of the buildings in Babilar, this one was peaked, and I carefully walked up to the tip. The sun, not yet risen, had brought a glow to the horizon. By that light I saw the source of the roar I'd heard earlier: the water was retreating from Babilar.

It washed outward like a sudden tide, exposing skyscrapers covered in barnacles. Sparks. The foundations had to be incredibly weakened from being submerged for so long. The tide might very well destroy the city, killing everyone Prof had given himself to save. One careless swing of my sword might have cost thousands of lives.

Well, no buildings were collapsing at the moment, and there was nothing I could do about them if they did.

So I sat down.

Sitting up there in the night's last darkness gave me some perspective. I thought about my part in all of this, and whether I'd pushed Prof too hard to become a hero. How much of this was my fault? Did it matter?

Regalia probably would have managed all of this if I hadn't been hounding Prof. The most disturbing part was that she had accomplished it by preying upon Prof's own innate honor.

I was certain of one thing. Whatever had happened to Prof, it wasn't his fault. Any more than it would be a man's fault if, drugged to oblivion by a cruel prank, he thought the people around him were devils and started shooting them. Regalia had killed Exel and Val, not Prof. Of course, maybe she couldn't be blamed either. She was in the power's grip too.

If not her, then who? I looked away from the horizon and toward that glowing red spot. It hung on the opposite side of the sky from the sun.

"You're behind this," I whispered to Calamity. "Who are you, really?"

Calamity gave no answer as it—he?—sank below the horizon. I turned back toward Babilar. I might not be to blame for what had happened to Prof, ultimately, but that didn't mean I was innocent. Ever since coming to Babilar, I'd stumbled from one crisis to another, rarely following the plan.

Reckless heroism. Prof was right.

So what do I do now? I thought. *Prof, the real Prof, would want*

me to have a plan.

Nothing came to me. Of course, this wasn't the time to plan. The time to plan was before everything went wrong, before your mentor was betrayed and corrupted, before the girl you loved was shot. Before your friends died.

Something appeared in the distance, moving over the waters, and I sat up straighter to get a better look. A small disc—a forcefield, I realized—with a figure in black standing atop it. It grew larger and larger as it sped through the air.

So Prof could use his fields to fly. His power portfolio was *amazing*. I stood up, balancing on the rooftop, gripping the necklace that Abraham had given me, which dangled from its chain in my fist.

It flashed bright as the sun finally broke over the horizon, bathing me in light. Was it my mind, or was the light stronger than it should have been?

Prof approached on his flying disc, his lab coat fluttering behind him. He landed on the other side of the small peaked roof from me, and regarded me with a strange interest. Again I was struck by how different he seemed. This man was *cold*. It was him, but a him with all of the wrong emotions.

"You don't have to do this, Prof," I told him.

He smiled and raised a hand. Sunlight bathed our rooftop.

"I believe in the heroes!" I shouted, holding up the pendant. "I believe they will come, as my father believed. This is not how it will end! Prof, I have faith. *In you.*"

A forcefield globe appeared around me, breaking the roof tiles under my feet, enclosing me perfectly. It was exactly like the one that had killed Val.

"I believe," I whispered.

Prof squeezed his hand closed.

The sphere compressed … but suddenly, though I'd been inside it a moment ago, I wasn't in it now. I could see it right in front of me, shrunken to the size of a basketball.

What?

Prof frowned. That sunlight, it was getting brighter, and brighter, and …

And a figure of pure white light *exploded* into existence between me and Prof. It blazed like the sun itself, a feminine figure, radiant, powerful, golden hair blown back and shining like

a corona.

Megan had arrived.

Prof summoned another forcefield globe around me. The figure of light thrust a hand toward him, and suddenly that globe was around Prof *himself* instead. Megan was changing reality, making possibilities into fact.

Prof looked even more surprised this time. He dismissed the globe and summoned another around the figure of light, but when it started to shrink it was around him again in an eyeblink, closing him in, threatening to crush him.

He dismissed it, and I saw something else in his eyes I'd never seen before. Fear.

They're all afraid, I thought. *Deep down. Newton fled from me. Steelheart killed anyone who might know anything about him. They're driven by fear*.

That wasn't the Prof I knew, but it *was* the High Epic Phaedrus. Confronted by someone who manipulated his powers in ways he didn't understand, he became terrified. He stumbled away, eyes wide.

In the space of a heartbeat, we were somewhere else.

Me and the glowing figure. One building over, inside a room with a window through which I could see Prof standing on the rooftop. Alone.

The glowing figure beside me sighed, then her glow vanished and resolved into Megan, completely naked. She fell, and I managed to catch her. Outside the window, on the next building over Prof cursed, then hopped on his disc. He sped away.

Sparks. How was I going to deal with him?

The answer was in my arms. I looked down at Megan, that perfect face, those beautiful lips. I'd been right to have faith in the Epics. I'd just chosen the wrong one.

Her eyes opened, and she saw me. "I don't feel like killing you," she whispered.

"More wonderful words have never been spoken," I said back.

She stared at me, then groaned, closing her eyes again. "Oh hell. The secret *is* the power of love. I'm going to be sick."

"Actually, I think it's something else," I said.

She looked at me. I was suddenly made conscious that she was very, *very* naked, and I was nearly naked as well. She followed my eyes, then shrugged. I blushed and put her down, then moved

to find something for her to wear. As I stood, however, clothing appeared on her—the standard jeans and shirt, shadows of clothing from another dimension. Good enough for now, I supposed.

"What *is* the secret, then?" she asked, sitting up and running her hand through her hair. "Every other time I've reincarnated, I've been *bad* when I first came back. Unable to remember myself, violent, destructive. This time … I feel nothing. What changed?"

I looked her in the eyes. "Was that building already on fire when you ran into it?"

She pursed her lips. "Yeah," she admitted. "It was stupid. You don't need to tell me it was. I knew you probably weren't in there, not for real. But I thought—maybe you were, and I couldn't risk that you might be…." She shivered visibly.

"How afraid of the fire were you?"

"More than you can possibly know," she whispered.

I smiled. "And that," I said, gathering her into my arms again, "is the secret."

Epilogue

ABOUT five hours later I sat on top of what had once been a low building in Babilar, warming my hands at a cookfire. The building now rose some twenty stories over the once-submerged street below.

Not a single building had collapsed as the waters left. “It’s the roots,” Megan said, settling down next to me and handing me a bowl of soup. She wore real clothing now, which was kind of unfortunate, but likely more practical, as it had gotten really cold in the city all of a sudden. “Those roots are tough stuff, tougher than any plant has a right to be. They’re literally holding the buildings up.” She shook her head as if amazed.

“Dawnslight didn’t want his utopia to fall if he did,” I said, stirring my soup. “The fruit?”

“Still glowing,” Megan said. “The city will survive. He was warming the water somehow to keep the place from getting too cold, though. He’s going to have to find another way to deal with that.”

Other people moved about us. The people of Babilar were banding together in what they saw as a crisis, and we were just two more refugees. If any who passed saw something different about me, recognized me from one of the fights, they didn’t say anything. At least, nothing more than a few hushed whispers to their companions.

“So,” Megan said, “this theory of yours …”

“It *has* to be fear,” I said, exhausted. How long had it been since I’d had any sleep? “I faced down the waters, and then was immune to Regalia trying to make me an Epic. You rushed into a burning building to save me, despite your terror, and you awoke

free from the corruption. Epics are afraid, at their core. It's how we beat them."

"Maybe," Megan said, uncertain. Sparks. How was it that someone could look so good simply stirring soup? And while wearing clothing a size too big, her face red from the chill? I smiled, then noticed she was staring at me too.

That seemed to be a very good sign.

"The theory makes sense," I said, blushing. "It's like oatmeal on pancakes."

She cocked an eyebrow at me, then tried her soup. "You know," she said, "you're not actually bad at metaphors …"

"Thanks!"

"… because most of the things you say are *similes*. Those are really what you're bad at."

I nodded thoughtfully, then pointed my spoon at her. "Nerd."

She smiled and drank her soup.

As good as it was to be with her, I found the taste of my soup bitter. I couldn't laugh. Not after what had happened. We ate in silence, and as Megan stood she put a hand on my shoulder.

"If either of them had been told," she said softly, "the cost they would have to pay to save the city, do you doubt they'd have agreed to it in a heartbeat?"

I reluctantly shook my head.

"Val and Exel died as part of an important fight," Megan said. "And we'll stop it from consuming others. Somehow."

I nodded. I hadn't confronted her about Sam yet. There would be time for that eventually.

She went looking for a refill. I stared at my bowl. Sadness gnawed at me, but I didn't give it free rein.

I was too busy planning.

A moment later I picked out a voice from those around us. I stood, lowering my bowl, then pushed my way past two chatting Babilarans.

"He's a goofy-looking fellow," Mizzy was saying. "Tallish. Terrible fashion sense …" Then she saw me, her eyes opening wide. "Um … he has some good attributes too.…"

I grabbed her in a hug. "You heard the broadcast."

"Yeaaaah," she said. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I asked some people to broadcast a message to you and Tia,

hoping you'd pick it up on your radio and … You didn't hear it?"

She shook her head, which was annoying. I'd wracked my brain trying to come up with a way to make sure Prof didn't get to her. I'd thought the radio idea would be a good one. After all, we'd been able to use the shortwave to reach Abraham in Newcago.

Missouri held up a small slip of paper and showed it to me. Fortune cookie paper. *Missouri*, it read, *hide. Hide now*.

"When did you find this?" I asked.

"Last night," she said. "Right before dawn. About a hundred of them said that. Creeped me out, I'll tell ya. Figured I should do what it said. Why? You look sad."

I'd have to tell her about the others. Sparks. I opened my mouth to explain, but at that moment Megan returned.

The two of them locked gazes.

"Uh, could we not shoot one another?" I said, nervous. "For now? Pretty please?"

Mizzy looked away from Megan pointedly. "We'll see. Here. I think this one is for you, maybe?" She held up another slip of paper. "It was the only one that was different."

I hesitantly took the paper.

Dream good dreams, Steelslayer, it read.

"Do you know what it means?" Mizzy asked.

"It means," I said, folding the paper in my hand, "that we have a lot of work to do."

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ANOTHER book has arrived! Once again, my name may be on the cover, but a ton of unseen hands helped with its creation. This book is unusual in that it was the first one I created with the specific help of the Dragonsteel Think Tank, a name I'm giving right now (and will probably never use again) for the brainstorming group who went out to lunch with me and helped me work through problems in the outline.

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Brandon Sanderson

BRANDON SANDERSON is the author of the number one *New York Times* bestseller *Steelheart*, the first book in the Reckoners series; the internationally bestselling Mistborn trilogy; and the Stormlight Archive. He was also chosen to complete Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series. His books have been published in more than twenty-five languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. *Firefight* is the second book in the Reckoners series.

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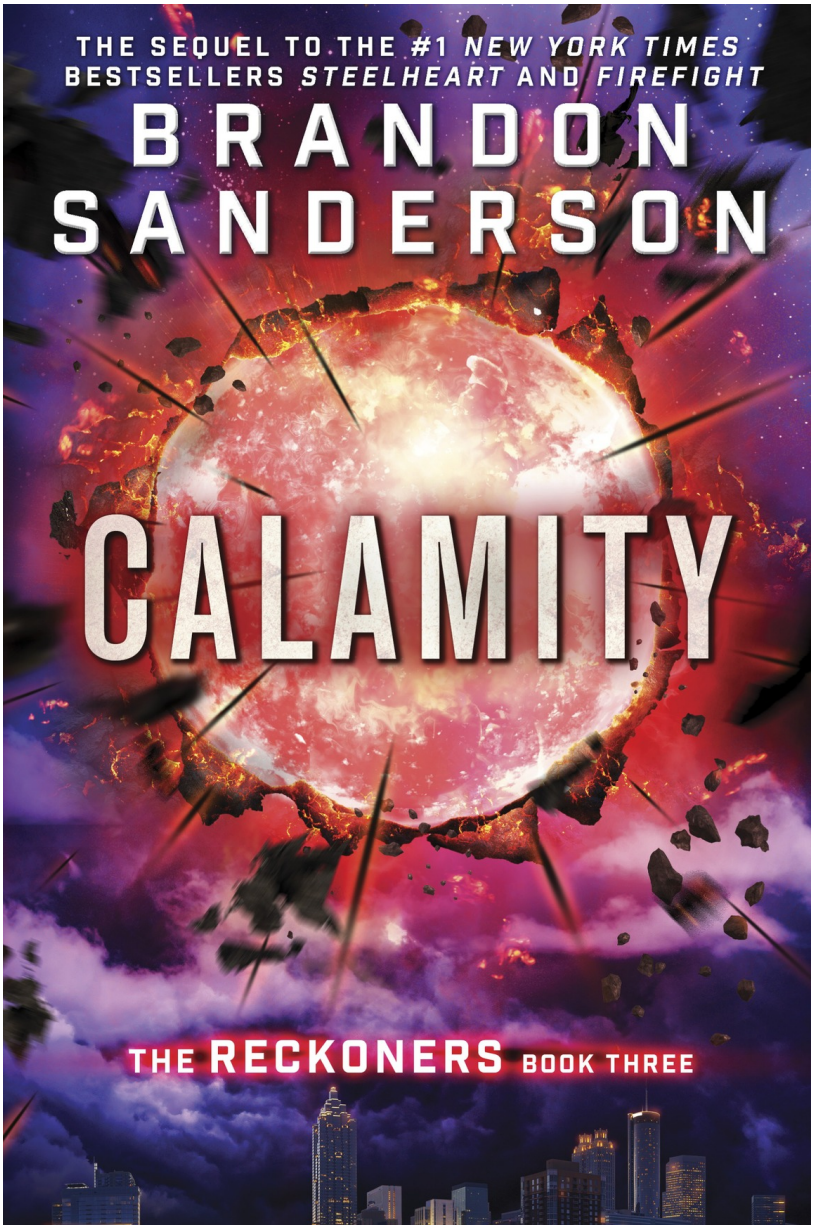
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For Kaylynn ZoBell

A writer, reader, critiquer, and friend,
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with a bunch of loudmouths
and still raises her hand politely to make comments,
instead of murdering us.
(Thanks for all your help over the years, Kaylynn!)

Prologue

I'VE witnessed the fearsome depths.

I was in Babilar, Babylon Restored. Formerly New York City. I stared into the burning red star known as Calamity, and knew—with no uncertainty—that something inside me had changed.

The depths had claimed me as one of their own. And though I've pushed them back, I still bear their hidden scar.

They insist that they will have me again.

PART ONE

1

THE sun peeked over the horizon like the head of a giant radioactive manatee. I crouched, hidden in a tree of all places. I'd forgotten how weird the things smell.

"We good?" I whispered over the line. Instead of using mobiles, we were relying on old radios we'd rigged to work with headsets. The audio snapped and popped as I spoke. Primitive technology, but essential for this job.

"Wait a sec," Megan said. "Cody, you in position?"

"Sure am," crackled the reply, laced with a calm Southern drawl. "If anyone tries to sneak up on you, lass, I'll put a bullet up his nose."

"Ew," Mizzy said over the line.

"We'll move in five," I said from my perch. Cody had called the contraption I was using a "tree stand," which was really a glorified camp chair strapped some thirty feet up the trunk of an elm. Hunters had used them back in the day for hiding from game.

I put my Gottschalk—a sleek, military-style assault rifle—to my shoulder and sighted through the trees. Normally, in this sort of situation I'd be sighting on an Epic: one of the super-powered individuals who terrorized the world. I was a Reckoner, same as my team, dedicated to bringing down dangerous Epics.

Unfortunately, life for the Reckoners had stopped making sense about two months ago. Our leader, Prof, was an Epic himself—and had been caught in a rival's intricate plot to find a successor. Consumed by his powers, he had left Regalia's empire in Babilar, but had taken with him her hard

drives, complete with notes and secrets. We intended to stop him. And that led me here.

To a large castle.

Seriously. A castle. I'd figured those were just in old movies and foreign countries, yet here one was hidden in the woods of West Virginia. And despite the modern metal gates and high-tech security system, this place looked like it had been around since long before Calamity appeared in the sky—lichen covered the stonework, and vines twisted up one of the weathered walls.

Pre-Calamity people had been weird. Awesome too—evidence: castle—but still pretty weird.

I looked away from my scope and glanced at Abraham, who was hiding in a nearby tree. I could pick him out only because I knew exactly what to look for. His dark outfit blended well into the dappled shades of morning, which was—our informant said—the best time to assault this particular location: Shewbrent Castle, also known as the Knighthawk Foundry. The world's primary source of Epic-derived technology. We'd used their weapons and tech to fight Steelheart, then Regalia.

Now we were going to rob them.

"Everyone have their mobiles off?" I asked over the line. "Batteries out?"

"You've asked that three times already, David," Megan replied.

"Check anyway."

They all gave the affirmative, and I took a deep breath. So far as we knew, we were the last cell of Reckoners. Two months in and we still had no sign of Tia, which meant she was probably dead. That left *me* in charge—though I'd gotten the job by default. Abraham and Cody had laughed when I'd asked if they wanted it, while Mizzy had gone stiff as a board and almost started hyperventilating.

Now we were putting my plan in motion. My crazy, foolhardy, incredible plan. Honestly, I was terrified.

My watch buzzed. Go time.

"Megan," I said into my radio, "you're up."

"On it."

I shouldered my rifle again, peering through the trees toward where Megan would launch her assault. I felt blind. With my mobile, I could have tapped into Megan's view to follow her attack, or I could have at least

brought up a local map and watched my team represented as blips. Our mobiles, however, had been built and distributed by Knighthawk—who also maintained the secure network they ran on. Using those to coordinate an attack on Knighthawk's own installation seemed about as smart as using toothpaste for salad dressing.

"Engaging," Megan said, and soon a pair of explosions shook the air. I scanned through my scope and picked out the smoke trails rising in the sky, but couldn't see Megan; she was on the other side of the castle. Her job was to make a frontal assault, and those blasts had been grenades she'd thrown at the front gate.

Attacking the Knighthawk Foundry was, of course, *absolutely* suicidal. We all knew this, but we were also desperate, low on resources, and being hunted by Jonathan Phaedrus himself. Knighthawk refused to deal with us, and had gone completely silent to our requests.

Our choices had been to try to take on Prof unequipped, or to come here and see what we could steal. This seemed the better of two bad options.

"Cody?" I asked.

"She's doing fine, lad," he said over the crackling radio line. "It looks just like that video. The place released drones right after the explosions happened."

"Pick off what you can," I said.

"Roger."

"Mizzy?" I said. "You're up."

"Groovy."

I hesitated. "Groovy? Is that some kind of code word?"

"You don't know…Sparks, David, you can be a real square sometimes." Her words were punctuated by another series of explosions, larger this time. My tree shook from the shock waves.

I didn't need my scope to see the smoke rising from my right, along the castle's flank. Soon after the blast, a group of basketball-sized drones—sleek and metallic, with propellers on top—popped from windows and flew toward the smoke. Larger machines rolled out of shadowed alcoves; spindly and about as tall as a person, each had a gun arm on the top and moved on tracks instead of wheels.

I followed these with my scope as they started firing into the woods where Mizzy had planted flares in buckets to give off heat signatures. Remotely firing machine guns enhanced the illusion that a large squad of

soldiers was out there hiding. We kept all the shots aimed high. We didn't want Abraham in the crossfire when it was his turn to move.

The Knighthawk defense played out exactly as we'd been shown on the video from our informant. Nobody had ever successfully breached the place, but many had tried. One group, a reckless paramilitary force out of Nashville, had taken videos, and we'd managed to get copies. Best we could guess, most of the time all of those drones were inside patrolling the hallways. Now, however, they were out fighting.

Hopefully that would give us an opening.

"All right, Abraham," I said into the line, "your turn. I'll cover."

"And off I go," Abraham said softly. The careful, dark-skinned man rode a thin cable down from his tree, then slipped silently across the forest floor. Though he was thick of arm and neck, Abraham moved with surprising nimbleness as he reached the wall, which was still shadowed in the early-morning light. His tight infiltration outfit would mask his heat signature, at least as long as the heat sinks on his belt were functional.

His job was to sneak into the Foundry, steal whatever weapons or technology he could find, and get out in under fifteen minutes. We had basic maps from our informant claiming that the labs and factories on the bottom floor of the castle were stuffed with goodies ripe for the plucking.

I watched Abraham nervously through my scope—pulling the aim point to the right so an accidental discharge wouldn't hit him—to make sure no drones spotted him.

They didn't. He used a retractable line to get to the top of the short wall, then another to reach the castle's roof. He hid beside one of the crenellations while he prepared his next step.

"There's an opening to your right, Abraham," I said into the line. "One of the drones popped out of a hole beneath the window on that tower."

"Groovy," Abraham said, though the word sounded particularly odd coming from him, with his smooth French accent.

"Please tell me that's not a real word," I said, then raised my gun to follow him along as he made for the opening.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Mizzy asked.

"It just sounds weird."

"And things we say today don't? 'Sparks'? 'Slontze'?"

"Those are normal," I said. "Not weird at all." A flying drone passed by,

but fortunately my suit was masking my heat signature. That was good, since the wetsuitlike clothing was pretty darn uncomfortable. Though mine wasn't as bad as Abraham's; his had a face mask and everything. To a drone I'd have a tiny heat signature, like a squirrel or something. A secretly very, very deadly squirrel.

Abraham reached the alcove I'd pointed out. Sparks, that man was good at sneaking. In the moment since I'd looked away, I'd lost him, and had trouble locating him again. He had to have *some* kind of special forces training.

"There's a door in here, unfortunately," Abraham said from his alcove. "It must close after the machines exit. I will try to hot-wire my way in."

"Great," I said. "Megan, you good?"

"Alive," she said, puffing. "For now."

"How many drones can you see?" I asked. "Have they rolled out the larger ones on you yet? Can—"

"Little busy, Knees," she snapped.

I settled back, anxiously listening to the gunfire and explosions. I wanted to be out there in the mess, firing and fighting, but that wouldn't make sense. I wasn't stealthy like Abraham or…well, *immortal* like Megan. Having an Epic such as her on the team was certainly an advantage. They could handle this. My job as leader was to hang back and make judgment calls.

It sucked.

Was this how Prof had felt during missions he supervised? He had usually waited it out, leading from behind the scenes. I hadn't realized how tough that would be. Well, if there was one thing I'd learned in Babilar, it was that I needed to rein in my hotheadedness. I needed to be like…half a hothead instead. A hot chin?

So I waited as Abraham worked. If he couldn't get in soon, I'd have to call off the mission. The longer this took, the greater the chances that the mysterious people who ran the Foundry would discover that our "army" was only five people.

"Status, Abraham?" I said.

"I think I can get this open," he said. "Just a little longer."

"I don't…" I trailed off. "Wait a sec, what was that?"

A low rumbling was coming from nearby. I scanned below me and was surprised to see the mulchy forest floor *buckling*. Leaves and moss folded

back, revealing a metal doorway. Another group of drones flew out of it, zipping past my tree.

"Mizzy," I hissed into my headset. "Other drones are trying to flank your position."

"Bummer," Mizzy said. She hesitated a moment. "Do you—"

"Yes, I know that word. You might need to institute the next phase." I glanced down at the opening, which was rumbling closed. "Be prepared; it looks like the Foundry has tunnels leading out to the forest. They'll be able to deploy drones from unexpected positions."

The door below stopped, half shut. I frowned, leaning down to get a better look. It appeared that some dirt and rocks had fallen into one of the door's gears. Guess that was the problem with hiding your entrance in the middle of a forest.

"Abraham," I said into my headset, excited, "the opening out here jammed open. You could get in this way."

"I think that might be difficult," he said, and I looked back up to note that a couple of drones had retreated after a barrage of explosions from Mizzy's side. They hovered near Abraham's position.

"Sparks," I whispered, then raised my rifle and picked the two machines off with a pair of shots. They fell; we'd come prepared with bullets that fried electronics when they hit. I didn't know how they worked, but they'd cost basically everything we could scrounge up in trade, including the copter that Cody and Abraham had escaped Newcago in. It was too conspicuous anyway.

"Thanks for the assist," Abraham said as the drones dropped.

Beneath me, the gears on the opening scraped against one another, trying to force their way closed. The door moved another inch.

"This entrance is going to close any second," I said. "Get here fast."

"Stealthy is not fast, David," Abraham said.

I glanced at that opening. Newcago was lost to us; Prof had already attacked and ransacked all of our safehouses there. We'd barely gotten Edmund—another of our Epic allies—out to a safe hiding spot.

The people of Newcago were terrified. Babilar was little better: few resources to be had, and old minions of Regalia's were keeping an eye on the place, serving Prof now.

If this robbery went bust, we'd be broke. We'd have to set up somewhere off the map and try to rebuild over the next year, which would

leave Prof with free rein to rampage. I wasn't sure what he was up to, why he'd left Babilar so quickly, but it bespoke some kind of plot or plan. Jonathan Phaedrus, now consumed by his powers, wouldn't be content to sit in a city and rule. He had ambitions.

He could be the most dangerous Epic this world had ever known. My stomach twisted at that thought. I couldn't justify any more delays.

"Cody," I said. "Can you see and cover Abraham?"

"Just a sec," he said. "Yeah, I got 'im."

"Good," I said. "Because I'm going in. You have ops."

2

I slid down my rope and hit the forest floor, crunching dried leaves. Ahead of me, the door to the hole finally started moving again. With a yelp, I dashed toward the opening in the ground and jumped in, skidding a short distance down a shallow ramp as the door closed with a final grinding sound behind me.

I was in. Also, likely trapped.

So…yay?

Faint emergency lights running along the walls revealed a sloping tunnel that was rounded at the top like a giant's throat. The incline wasn't very steep, so I climbed to my feet and started inching down the slope, gun at my shoulder. I switched my radio, carried at my hip, to a different frequency —protocol for whoever made it into the Foundry, to let me focus. The others would know how to reach me.

The dimness made me want to flip on my mobile, which could double as a flashlight, but I restrained myself. Who knew what kind of backdoors the Knighthawk Foundry might have built into the things? In fact, who knew what the phones were truly capable of? They had to be some kind of Epic-derived technology. Phones that worked under any circumstances with signals that couldn't be intercepted? I'd grown up in a pit underneath Newcago, but even I realized how fantastical that was.

I reached the bottom of the incline and flipped on my scope's night-vision and thermal settings. *Sparks,* this was an awesome gun. The silent corridor stretched out before me, nothing but smooth metal, floor to ceiling. Considering its length, the tunnel had to lead under the Foundry walls and

into the compound; it was probably an access corridor.

Contraband photos of the Foundry interior showed all kinds of motivators and technology lying around on workbenches down here. That had enticed us to try this all-in plan. Grab and go, hope we ended up with something useful.

It would be technology built, somehow, from the bodies of Epics. Even before I'd discovered that Prof had powers, I should have realized how much we relied on Epics. I'd always dreamed that the Reckoners were some kind of pure, human freedom force—ordinary people fighting an extraordinary foe.

That wasn't the way it happened though, was it? Perseus had his magic horse, Aladdin had his lamp, and Old Testament David had his blessing from Jehovah. You want to fight a god? You'd better have one on your side too.

In our case, we'd cut off pieces of the gods, trapped them in boxes, and channeled their power. Much of it had originated here. The Knighthawk Foundry, secretive purveyors of Epic corpses made into weapons.

My headset crackled and I jumped.

"David?" Megan's voice, dialed into the private radio line. "What are you doing?"

I winced. "I found a drone access tunnel in the forest floor and managed to sneak in," I whispered.

Silence on the line, followed by "Slontze."

"What? Because it's reckless?"

"Sparks, no. Because you didn't take me."

An explosion shook somewhere near her.

"Sounds like you're having plenty of fun," I said. I kept moving forward, my rifle up and my focus ahead, watching for drones.

"Yeah, sure," Megan said. "Intercepting mini-missiles with my face. Loads of fun."

I smiled; the mere sound of her voice could do that to me. Hell, I'd rather be yelled at by Megan than be praised by anyone else. Besides, the fact that she was talking to me meant she hadn't *actually* intercepted any mini-missiles with her face. She was immortal in that if she died, she'd be reborn—but she was otherwise as fragile as anyone else. And because of recent concerns, she tried to limit using her powers.

She'd be doing this mostly the old-fashioned way. Ducking between

trees, lobbing grenades and taking shots while Cody and Mizzy covered her. I imagined her cursing softly, sweating while she sighted at a passing drone, her aim perfect, her face…

…Uh, right. I should probably stay focused.

"I'll keep their attention up here," Megan said, "but be careful, David. You don't have a full infiltration suit. You'll have a heat signature to those drones, if they look closely."

"Groovy," I whispered. Whatever that meant.

Ahead of me the tunnel started getting lighter, so I turned off the night vision on the scope and slowed my pace. I crept forward and stopped. The access tunnel ended at a large white corridor that stretched to the right and left. Brightly lit, with tile floors and metal walls, it was completely empty. Like an office when the shop down the street has free donut day.

I pulled our maps, such as we had, from my pocket and checked them. Didn't say much, though one of the photos looked a lot like this corridor. Well, somehow I had to find useful technology in here, steal it, and get out.

Prof or Tia could have come up with a way better plan, but they weren't here. So I picked a direction at random and continued walking. When the tense silence was broken a few minutes later by a quickly approaching sound echoing through the corridor, it was actually a relief.

I dashed toward the sound; not because I was eager to meet it, but because I spotted a door up the hall. I reached it in time to pull it open—thankfully, it wasn't locked—and slip into a dark room. My back against the door, I heard a group of drones zip past outside. I turned and looked through the little window in the door to watch them buzz down the white corridor, then turn into the access tunnel.

They hadn't spotted my heat signature. I flipped my radio to the open line and whispered, "More drones are going out the way I came in. Cody, status?"

"We've got a few tricks left," Cody said, "but it's getting frantic out here. Abraham did manage to get in through the roof though. The two of you should grab what you can find and get out ASAP."

"Roger," Abraham said over the line.

"Got it," I said, glancing around the room I'd entered. It was completely dark, but judging by the sterile smell, it was some kind of lab chamber. I flipped on my night-vision scope and gave the place a quick once-over.

Turned out I was surrounded by bodies.

3

I choked back a cry of alarm. Rifle to my shoulder, I scanned the room again, my heart thumping. It was filled with long metal tables and sinks, interspersed with several large tubs, and the walls were lined floor to ceiling with shelves packed with jars of all sizes. I leaned in to get a better look at those jars on a shelf near me. Body parts. Fingers. Lungs. Brains. All human, according to the labels. This had to be a laboratory where bodies were dissected.

I shoved down my nausea and focused. Would they keep motivators in a room like this? Anything I found that used Epic technology would need a motivator to work—the mission would be useless unless I found a stash of those.

I started looking for them—they'd be small metal boxes, about the size of a mobile's battery. Sparks. Everything was bathed in the green of the night vision, and through the tunnel view of my rifle's scope, the place took on another level of eerie.

"Yo," Mizzy's voice said on the line, and I jumped again. "David, you there?"

"Yeah," I whispered.

"Fighting on my side has moved over toward Megan, so I've got a breather," Mizzy said. "Cody told me to see if you needed anything."

I wasn't certain what she could do from such a distance, but it was good to hear someone's voice. "I'm in some kind of lab," I answered. "It has shelves full of body parts in jars and…" I felt nauseous again, swinging my gun to get a better look through the scope at the tubs nearby. They each had a

glass lid, and they were full. I gagged and recoiled. "…and some vats filled with floating chunks of something. It's like a bunch of cannibals were getting ready to go bobbing for apples. Adam's apples, at least."

I reached out and opened a cupboard, where I found an entire shelf of pickled hearts. As I moved onward, my foot touched something that squished. I jumped back, gun toward the floor, but it was only a wet rag.

"Mizzy," I whispered, "this place is super creepy. Think I'm safe to turn on a light in here?"

"Oh, that'd be waaaay smart. The people with a hyperadvanced bunker and flying attack drones aren't going to have security cameras in their labs. Nope. Not a chance."

"Point taken."

"Or they've already spotted you and a squad of death-copters is heading your way. But in case you're *not* trapped and about to be executed, I'd err on the side of being careful."

She said it all in an upbeat, almost excited voice; Mizzy could be perkier than a sack of caffeinated puppies. Usually that was encouraging. Usually I wasn't on edge from sneaking through a room full of half corpses.

I knelt, touching the rag on the floor. That it was still wet might imply someone had been working in here overnight, and had been interrupted by our attack.

"Anything you can swipe?" Mizzy asked.

"Not unless you want to stitch yourself up a new boyfriend."

"Ew. Look, just see what you can grab and get out. We're already over time."

"Right," I said, opening another cabinet. Surgical utensils. "I'll hurry. It — Wait a sec."

I froze, listening. Had I heard something?

Yes, a kind of rattling. I tried not to imagine a corpse rising out of one of those tubs. The sound had come from near the door I'd entered through, and a tiny light flicked on suddenly near the floor in the same area.

I frowned, inching toward it. It was a small drone, flat and round, with whirring brushes along its bottom. It had come in through a little flap near the door—kind of like a cat door—and was buffing the floor.

I relaxed. "Only a cleaning bot," I said over the line.

The bot immediately went silent. Mizzy started to reply, but I lost the

words as the little cleaning bot reengaged and zipped back toward its door. Throwing myself to the ground, I stretched out a hand and barely managed to grab the little drone before it could scoot out through the small hinged flap.

"David?" Mizzy asked, anxious. "What was that?"

"Me being an idiot," I said with a wince. I'd knocked my elbow on the ground as I dove. "The bot recognized something was wrong and made a break for it. I caught it before it got out though. It might have warned someone."

"Might anyway," Mizzy said. "It could have a link to the place's security."

"I'll be quick," I said, climbing to my feet. I set the cleaning bot upside down on a shelf near a rack of blood pouches hanging in a small cooler with a glass door. Several more were lying out in the open on the counter. Ick.

"Maybe some of these body parts are from Epics," I said. "I could take them, and we'd have DNA samples. Could we use those?"

"How?"

"I dunno," I said. "Make weapons out of them somehow?"

"Yeaaaah," Mizzy said skeptically, "I'll staple a foot to the front of my gun and hope it shoots lasers now or something."

I blushed in the darkness, but I didn't see the need for the ribbing. If I stole some valuable DNA, we could trade it for supplies, right? Though admittedly, these body parts probably wouldn't do. The important parts of Epic DNA degraded quickly, so I'd need to find frozen tissue if I wanted something I could sell.

Freezers. Where would I find freezers? I checked one of the tubs, lifting the glass lid, but the water inside was chilly, not frozen. I let the top back down, scanning the room. There was a door at the rear, opposite the one that led out to the hallway.

"You know," I said to Mizzy as I walked toward the door, "this place is exactly like I'd expect it to be."

"You *expected* a room full of body parts?"

"Yeah, kinda," I said. "I mean, crazy scientists making weapons from dead Epics? Why *wouldn't* they have a room full of body parts?"

"Not sure what you're driving at with this, David. Other than creeping me out."

"Just a sec." I reached the door, which was locked.

It took a few kicks, but I got it open. I wasn't too worried about the noise—if someone nearby was listening, they'd already have heard me struggling with the little drone. The door swung back, revealing a dark corridor, smaller than the hallway outside and completely unlit. I listened, heard nothing, and decided to see where it went.

"Anyway," I continued, "it makes me wonder. How *do* they make weapons out of Epics?"

"Dunno," Mizzy said. "I can fix the stuff once we get it, but motivators are out of my league."

"When an Epic dies, their cells immediately start to break down," I said. "Everyone knows that part."

"Everyone who is a nerd."

"I'm not a—"

"It's okay, dude," Mizzy said. "Embrace your nature! Be yourself and stuff. We're all basically nerds, only about different things. Except Cody. I think he's a geek or something…can't remember my terminology. Something about eating chicken heads?"

I sighed. "When an Epic dies, if you're fast enough, you can take a sample of their cells. The mitochondria are supposed to be important. You freeze those cells, and you can sell them on the black market. Somehow, *that* becomes technology. Problem is, Obliteration let Regalia perform surgery on him. I saw the scars. They made a bomb using his powers."

"So…"

"So why surgery?" I said. "He could have just given a blood sample, right? Why did Regalia call in some fancy surgeon?"

Mizzy went silent. "Huh," she finally said.

"Yeah." Honestly, I'd assumed that an Epic had to be dead to make technology from their powers. Regalia and Obliteration proved me wrong. But if you could create technology from living Epics, why hadn't Steelheart made a legion of invincible soldiers? Maybe he was too paranoid for that, but surely he would have created hundreds of versions of Edmund, the Epic who powered his city.

I reached a corner in the dark hallway. Using the infrared on my scope, I peeked around it and scanned for danger. The night vision revealed a small room filled with several large freezer chests. I didn't see any distinctive heat sources, though the timer on my scope's overlay warned me I should turn

back. Except if I left, and Abraham didn't get anything either, we'd be ruined. I *needed* to find something.

I crouched there, worried I was running out of time—but also bothered by what I'd seen. Beyond the question of making motivators from living Epics, there was another problem with all of this. When people talked about Epic-derived technology, they implied that all the devices came from a similar process. But how could that be? Weapons were so different from the dowser, which let us detect who was an Epic. Both seemed hugely different from the spyril, the piece of Epic-derived technology that had let me fly on streams of water.

I was no nerd, but I knew enough to realize that these technologies were all in very different disciplines. You didn't call a gerbil doctor to work on a horse—yet when it came to Epic technology, it seemed that one expertise was enough to create a variety of items.

I admitted the truth to myself: these questions were the real reason we were here at Knighthawk. Prof had kept secrets, even before succumbing to his powers. It felt like nobody had been straight with me about any of this, ever.

I wanted answers. They were probably here somewhere. Maybe I'd find them behind that group of robotic war drones that were extending their gun arms from behind the freezers in front of me.

Oh.

4

THE drones' floodlights turned on as one, blinding me, and they opened fire. Fortunately I'd spotted them in time, and was able to pull back around the corner before any shots hit me.

I turned and took off at a run, retreating down the corridor. Gunfire drowned out Mizzy's voice in my ear as the robot drones chased me. Each had a square bottom with multidirectional wheels, and a spindly body topped with an assault rifle. They'd be perfect for maneuvering around furniture and through hallways, but sparks, it felt humiliating to be running from them. They looked more like coatracks than machines of war.

I reached the door to the lab with the body parts and ran through it, skidding to a stop, then slammed my back against the wall next to it. The tap of a button patched the view from my scope into a small screen on the side of my Gottschalk rifle, which let me lift the gun around the corner and fire without risking a hit.

The robots scuttled like a group of sparking brooms on wheels. Personally, I'd have been embarrassed to create such stupid-looking robots. I fired in burst mode without much aiming, but the corridor was narrow enough that it didn't matter. I gunned down several of the robots, slowing the others, which had to push past the wreckage. After I dropped a few more, they retreated to take cover around the corner, in the room with the freezers.

"David?" Mizzy's frantic voice finally drew my attention. "What's happening?"

"I'm fine," I said. "But they spotted me."

"Get out."

I hesitated.

"David?"

"There's something in there, Mizzy. A room that was under lock and key, guarded by drones—I'll bet they moved in there as soon as our original attack happened. Either that, or that room is *always* guarded. Which means…"

"Oh, Calamity. You're going to be you, aren't you?"

"You *did* just tell me to, and I quote, 'embrace my nature.' " I fired another salvo as I caught motion at the end of the corridor. "Let Abraham and the others know I've been spotted. Pull everyone out and be ready to retreat."

"And you?"

"I'm going to find out what's in that room." I hesitated. "I might have to get shot to do it."

"What?"

"I'll be radio silent for a moment. Sorry."

I dropped my radio and headset, then tapped a button at the side of my gun that extended a small tripod on the bottom. I set it pointing into the tunnel at an angle, hoping to ricochet bullets off the metal wall toward the robots—but really setting up a distraction. The gun could remote fire, using the slightly melted controller I popped out of its alcove on the side.

I hurried through the room, triggering short bursts of fire to make it seem I was still exchanging shots with the drones. Their floodlights were bright enough that they reflected off glass and metal in this room, giving me enough light to move by. I snatched the little cleaning robot off the shelf, its wheels still whirring frantically, then grabbed a pouch of blood off the counter and a roll of surgical tape I'd spotted in a drawer earlier.

I tore off a piece of tape and affixed the pouch to the top of the robot, then punctured the bag with my knife. I crossed to where I'd originally entered the room, cracked open the door, and set the machine down outside it. It scuttled off down the white hallway at speed—leaving a wide trail of blood drops behind, as blatant as a sudden tuba solo in the middle of a rap single.

Great. Now hopefully I could fake the getting shot part. I grabbed another pouch of blood and stabbed it with my knife. Taking a deep breath, I ran to the door on the opposite side of the room, where the drones were firing on my Gottschalk.

The robots had made progress, shoving the fallen ones out of the way and advancing. I ducked back as the robots started firing at me, then I screamed and sprayed some of the blood on the wall. From there I dashed to one of the tubs, using the pouch to squirt a different trail toward the exit.

I couldn't see much of what was inside the tub, now that I wasn't using my scope, but I pulled it open, gritted my teeth, and climbed in—touching some slippery bits that I was pretty convinced were livers. As I settled into the icy fluid, I was profoundly aware of exactly how gruesome all this was. Fortunately, I was quite accustomed to my plans humiliating me in some way; this time I was merely doing it on purpose. So hey, progress!

I tried to remain still, hoping the tub's refrigeration unit and icy temperature would hide me from any infrared detection the robots might be using. Unfortunately, to not stand out, I had to close the top of the tub and hold my breath. And so I lay there among the bobbing body parts, watching lights flash above as the robots and their floodlights entered the laboratory. I couldn't see much through the water and the glass top, but I couldn't help imagining the robots gathering around the tub, looking in at me, amused at my feeble attempt at a distraction.

I held my breath until I was ready to burst. My face, not covered by my infiltration suit, was *freezing*. Blessedly, the lights finally vanished. I managed to last a little longer before I pushed open the top and, shivering, looked around the lab. Pitch-black.

The robots had apparently taken the bait. I wiped the liquid from my eyes and climbed out. Sparks. As if this place hadn't been creepy *before* I'd decided to crawl into a vat of livers to hide from death robots. I shook my head, crossing over to pick up my radio and gun. I shoved on the headset, but I had gotten blood on it, and it seemed to be on the fritz.

I'd have to use the radio the old way. "I'm back," I said quietly, pressing send and speaking into it.

"David, you're crazy," a voice responded.

I smiled. "Hello, Megan," I said, slipping into the narrow corridor. I jogged past fallen robots. "Everyone pulling out?"

"Everyone who's smart."

"Love you too," I said. I stopped at the corner where I'd first run into the robot guards and peeked around it. The room beyond was dark, like before. I looped my gun's strap around my shoulder, then used the scope to

look for lingering robots. “I’m almost ready to go. Give me a few more minutes.”

“Roger.”

I clicked the radio to send only, so that their chatter wouldn’t alert any nearby foes. Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to be more careful. My trick with the false trail would soon be discovered. As if in testament to the danger, a distant explosion shook the building.

I felt at the wall and turned on the lights, then crossed the room to one of the large standing freezers. The stainless steel surface reflected my face, which had two weeks’ worth of scrub on it. I thought it looked rugged. Megan tended to snicker at it.

Heart thumping, I unlocked the first of the chests and threw it open, releasing a burst of icy air. Inside were rows and rows of frozen glass vials with colorful caps. Not the motivators I’d been looking for, but most likely Epic DNA samples.

“Well,” I whispered, “at least it’s not a rack of frozen dinners.”

“No,” a voice responded. “I keep those in the other chest.”

5

I stood very still, a chill rising up my spine. I turned, careful not to make any sudden motions, and found that I had—unfortunately—missed a single robot hidden in the shadowed recesses of the room. That beanpole of a body was hardly intimidating, but the souped-up FAMAS G3 assault rifle mounted to its top was something else entirely.

I considered trying to shoot it, but my body was turned the wrong direction. I'd have to swing my gun around and hope to hit the robot before I got shot myself. My chances did not seem good.

"I actually *do* have food in the other one," the voice continued, projected from the robot. A man's voice, tenor, soft. He had to be one of the enigmatic people who ran the Foundry. Most of these drones seemed autonomous, but their masters would be watching—each gun had a camera on it. "Not frozen dinners, mind you. Steaks. A few choice ribeyes left over from the good old days. I miss those more than anything."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"The man you're trying to rob. How did you divert my drones?"

I bit my lip, trying to judge the response time of that gun as I inched to the side and watched it follow me. Sparks. The tracking apparatus was excellent; the gun stayed right on me. The robot's speakers even made a little cocking noise by way of warning, and I froze in place.

But did it have full range of movement? Maybe not…

"So this is what has become of the mighty Jonathan Phaedrus," the voice said. "Sending a hit team in to try to steal from me."

Phaedrus? Of course. The Knighthawk Foundry worker thought we

were still with Prof. We hadn't exactly trumpeted it out that he'd fallen to his powers; most people didn't even know he was an Epic in the first place.

"We only had to come," I said, "because you refused to trade with us."

"Yes, very honorable of you. 'Trade us what we want, or we'll take it by force.' I expected more of one of Jonathan's special teams. You barely…" The voice trailed off, then continued, fainter. "What do you mean there's another one? They stole *what*? How did they even know where those were, dammit?"

Something muffled responded. I tried to step away, but the drone made the cocking sound again, this time louder.

"You," the voice said, turning his attention back to me. "Call your friends. Tell them to return what the other man stole, or I *will* kill you. You have three seconds."

"Uh…"

"Two seconds."

"Guys!"

The wall to my right melted in a burst of heat, revealing a shadowy form beyond.

I dove and—against my instincts—rolled *toward* the robot drone. It got off an initial round at me, but—as I'd hoped—when I got too close, its gun couldn't angle down far enough to hit me.

That meant I only got shot once.

It hit me in the leg as I was rolling. Not sure how that managed to happen, but sparks, it *hurt.*

The robot tried to back away, but I seized it, ignoring the searing pain in my leg. Last time I'd been shot, I hadn't felt it at first, but this time I had trouble fighting through the sheer agony. Still, I managed to keep the robot from firing at me again as I reached up and unlocked the device that held the gun to the machine. It dropped free.

Unfortunately, as I'd been struggling, a good *two dozen* drones had unclipped from the ceiling—where they'd been disguised as panels—and hovered down on propellers. I hadn't been nearly as safe in here as I'd assumed, though for now their attention was focused on a figure that stepped through the slag of the wall: a man made entirely of flames, his figure the deep red of molten rock. Firefight had arrived. Too bad he wasn't real.

I grabbed my wounded thigh and scanned the room for Megan. She was hiding near the corner in the corridor leading back to the laboratory. Firefight

wasn't real, not completely, but neither was he an illusion. He was a shadow from another place, another version of our world. It wasn't that he had actually come to save me; Megan was just overlaying our world with a ripple from that world, making it seem like he was here.

It fooled the drones—indeed, I could *feel* the heat coming from the melted wall, and could smell smoke in the air. As the drones frantically started firing, I reached into the open freezer and grabbed a handful of vials. Then I limped across the room, joining Megan, who came to me as soon as she was aware that I'd been hit.

"Slontze," she said with a grunt, getting under my arm and hauling me toward cover, then shoved the vials I'd taken into her pocket. "I leave you alone for five minutes, and you go and get shot."

"At least I got you a present," I said, pushing my back against the wall inside the curve as she quickly bound my wound.

"Present? The vials?"

"I got you a new gun," I said, gritting my teeth at the pain as she pulled the bandage tight.

"You mean the FAMAS you left on the floor over there?"

"Yup."

"You realize that every one of the, like, a hundred drones I fought outside had one of those. We could build a fort out of them at this point."

"Well, once you finish using all those for a fort, you'll need one for shooting. So you're welcome! Even comes…" I winced at the pain. "Even comes with its own room full of death robots. And maybe some steaks. Don't know if he was lying about those or not."

Behind her, Firefight looked unconcerned, bullets melting before they reached him. It wasn't as hot as it should have been—it was as if the fire were distant, and we felt a breeze that blew out from it.

We barely understood how her powers worked. Those drones that Firefight melted weren't *actually* dead, and that wall hadn't *actually* been opened. The other world's ability to affect this one was fleeting. For a minute, we were all caught in the warping of reality as the two worlds mixed, but in moments it would all fade back to normal.

"I'm fine," I said. "We've got to move."

Megan said nothing, getting under my arm again. The fact that she gave no reply—and that she'd stopped us in the middle of a fight to look at the

wound—told me what I needed to know. I was hit bad, and bleeding a lot.

We shuffled away down the corridor toward the laboratory. As we did, I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no drones were following. None were, but I did catch an unnerving sight: Firefight was looking at me, *again.* Through the flames of distortion, two black eyes met my own. Megan swore he couldn't see our world, and yet he raised a hand toward me.

We were soon out of his sight. The loud pops of gunfire chased us as we staggered into the laboratory room with all the organs. We stepped to the side, anxious, as another group of drones scuttled past. They didn't even glance at us. There was an *Epic* to fight.

We crossed the room, then moved into the bright hallway outside. I left a *real* blood trail on the floor.

"What *was* that place?" Megan said. "Were those *hearts* in those jars?"

"Yeah," I said. "Man, my leg hurts…."

"Cody," Megan said, sounding alarmed, "is Abraham out?…Okay, good. Prime the jeeps, and have the first-aid kit ready. David's been shot."

Silence.

"I don't know how we're going to do that, Mizzy. Hopefully we can use the distraction like we planned. Be ready."

I focused on keeping myself moving through the pain. We turned up the tunnel leading to the hidden entrance I'd used to sneak into the place. Behind us, the shooting suddenly stopped.

Bad sign. Firefight had vanished.

"You couldn't make him follow us?" I asked.

"I need a breather," she said, eyes forward, jaw set. "This was hard enough in the old days, when I didn't care what it did to me."

"You mean—" I said.

"It's just a headache," she replied. "Like yesterday, but worse. It's as if…well, as if something were pounding on my skull, trying to get in. Creating such a large distortion in reality is pushing me to the edge. So let's hope that—"

She stopped. A group of drones was gathered in the access tunnel before us, blocking our path to the exit into the forest. That exit teased me; it was several hundred feet away, but I could see that it had been blown open by an explosion, letting in filtered sunlight. It was likely how Megan had entered, but with those drones between it and us, the exit might as well have been in

Australia.

Then, without warning, the ceiling caved in. Huge chunks of metal fell around us, and the tunnel shook as if in a blast. I knew enough by now though to recognize something *off* about the explosion. Perhaps the steel chunks didn't scrape as loudly as they should have, or perhaps it was the way the corridor shook. Or perhaps it was how those steel chunks fell directly in front of us, blocking the drones—which started firing, but missed hitting both Megan and me with any debris.

This was another dimensional illusion, though it was still violent enough to knock me from my feet. I hit with a grunt, trying to roll to my side to protect my wounded leg. The room spun, and for a moment I felt like a grasshopper stapled to a Frisbee.

When my vision wobbled back to a semblance of stability, I found myself huddled beside one of the fallen hunks of metal. It felt real to me, for the moment. Here, in the blending of two worlds Megan had created, the "illusion" was real.

My blood, which had soaked through the impromptu bandage, stained the floor like someone had wiped it with a dirty cloth. Megan knelt beside me, her head bowed, her breath coming in hisses.

"Megan?" I asked over the sounds of the firing drones. Sparks…they'd be on us soon, blockade or no blockade.

Megan's eyes were open wide, and her lips parted, exposing clenched teeth. Sweat trickled down her temples.

Whatever she'd been fighting off when using her powers recently, it was coming for her in force.

6

THIS wasn't supposed to happen.

We'd found the secret, the way to make Epics immune to the corrupting effects of their powers: if you faced your deepest fears, it caused the darkness to retreat.

It was *supposed* to be over; Megan had run into a burning building to save me, facing her fears head-on. She should have been free. And yet there was no denying the frantic cast to her expression—her clenched teeth, her tense brow. She turned toward me, not blinking. "I can feel him, David," she whispered. "He's trying to get in."

"Who?"

She didn't answer, but I knew who she meant. Calamity. Calamity, the red spot in the sky, the new star that had heralded the arrival of the Epics… was itself an Epic. I somehow knew Calamity was *supremely* angry that in learning that Epics' fears were connected to their weaknesses, we'd figured out how to overcome its influence on Megan.

The gunfire of the drones stopped.

"That cave-in is an illusion of some sort, isn't it?" the voice from before called, echoing in the corridor. "Which Epic did you kill to gain this technology? Who told you how to build the motivators?"

At least he was talking instead of shooting.

"Megan," I said, taking her arm. "Megan, look at me."

She focused on me, and that seemed to help, though the wildness was still there in her eyes. I was tempted to step back and let her unleash it. Maybe that would save us.

But it would doom her. When Prof had succumbed to the darkness brought by his powers, he'd killed friends without so much as flinching. That man, who had spent his life defending others, was now entirely subject to his powers.

I wouldn't have the same happen to Megan. I reached to my thigh pocket and—wincing as I shifted my wounded leg—pulled out my lighter. I held it up before Megan and flicked on the flame.

She shied back briefly, then hissed and *seized* the flame in her fist, burning her hand. The fallen metal chunks we'd been using as cover wavered, then faded out of existence. The ceiling repaired itself. Fire was still Megan's weakness—and even having faced her fears, the weakness negated her powers. And probably always would.

Fortunately, so long as she remained willing to face that weakness, she could apparently drive the darkness away. The tension left her, and she sank to the ground with a sigh. "Great," she muttered. "Now my head *and* my hand hurt."

I smiled wanly and slid my gun away across the ground, then did the same with Megan's. I raised my hands as the drones surrounded us. Most of them were the tracks-and-assault-rifle type, though there were also a few that flew. I was in luck—they held their fire.

One of the machines rolled closer. It had raised a small screen from its base, which projected a backlit shadowy figure. "That image was of Firefight, from Newcago, right? It fooled my sensors completely," the voice said. "No ordinary illusion could have done that. What technology are you using?"

"I'll tell you," Megan said. "Just don't shoot. Please." She stood up, and as she did so, she kicked something backward with her heel.

Her headset. Still lying on my side, I caught it under my hand and rolled onto it, masking the motion by holding my bleeding leg. I didn't think any drones spotted what we'd done.

"Well?" the voice said. "I'm waiting."

"Dimensional shadows," Megan said. "They aren't illusions, but ripples from another state of reality." She'd stood to face the robot army, putting herself between the robots and me. Most focused their weapons on her—and if they killed her, she'd reincarnate.

I appreciated her protective gesture, but sparks, reincarnating could do unpredictable things to her—particularly with how her powers had been acting lately. She hadn't died since we were in Babilar, and I hoped to keep it

that way.

I needed to do something. I curled up, still holding my leg. The pain was real. I could only hope the way I trembled and bled would make the drones dismiss me as I laid my head on the headset and covertly whispered into the microphone.

"Mizzy? You there? Cody? Abraham?"

No reply came.

"Impossible," the man said to Megan. "I've tried numerous times to capture that type of power in a motivator, and I doubt anyone has the knowledge to do what I could not. Dimensional rifting is too complex, too strong to…"

I glanced up at Megan, who stood tall and proud before the arrayed army, even though I knew her head must be splitting with pain. She'd spoken earlier in humility, as if beaten—but her posture told another story. Of a refusal to back down, to bend a knee, or to bow to anyone or anything.

"You're an Epic, aren't you?" the voice said, tone growing hard. "There *is* no technology, no motivator. Jonathan is recruiting, then? Now that he's turned?"

I couldn't stifle my gasp. How did he know about Prof? I wanted to demand answers, but I was in no position to do so. I rested my head against the floor, suddenly drowsy. Sparks. How much blood had I lost?

As my head touched the headset, it crackled and Mizzy's voice cut in. "Megan? Sparks, talk to me! Are you—"

"I'm here, Mizzy," I whispered.

"David? Finally! Look, I've placed charges to collapse the tunnel. Can you get out that way? I can blow it after you pass."

Charges. I glanced at the drones surrounding us.

Megan's illusions…

"Do it now, Mizzy," I whispered.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Then I braced myself.

The explosion blew above, and it somehow seemed *louder* because I'd been expecting it. The chunks of metal fell exactly where they had before, slamming to the ground inches from where I crouched—but I was left unharmed, as was Megan.

The robots, on the other hand, acted like a bunch of youthful dreams and got thoroughly crushed.

Megan was at my side in an instant, handgun pulled from her thigh holster, firing at the remaining drones. I managed to pull the knife out of my calf sheath and I held it up, drawing a glance from Megan that said, "Seriously?"

"At least it's not a stupid samurai sword," I muttered, putting my back to the debris. As the falling dust cleared, Megan picked off one final drone, sending it spinning to the ground.

I pushed myself to my feet—well, *foot*—and hobbled along the wreckage of the tunnel toward my gun.

"Where did *that* come from?" Megan asked, gesturing toward the broken ceiling. Mizzy's charges hadn't completely collapsed the tunnel—in fact, so far as I could tell, the fallen wreckage was *identical* to the illusory debris that Megan had created.

"Mizzy said she could blow the place after our escape."

"And you had her drop it on *top* of us instead?" Megan said, fetching my gun and handing it to me, then grabbing her rifle.

"I was thinking, your illusions pull from alternate realities, right? And the closer the reality is to ours, the easier it is to pull? You were really tired —"

"Still am."

"—and I figured you used a reality very like our own. Explosion from above. Mizzy had placed charges. So I guessed it would happen the same way."

Megan got under my arm again and helped me limp around the wreckage. She shot a drone that was trying to extricate itself from some fallen stone. "That might not have worked," she said softly. "Things don't always turn out like they do in the other realities. You could have crushed yourself, David."

"Well, I didn't," I said, "so for now we're safe…."

I trailed off as sounds echoed up the corridor, coming from far behind us. Metallic sounds. The whirring of copters. Treads on metal.

Megan looked at me, then at the exit to the forest ahead, still a hundred feet away.

"Let's hurry," I said, hobbling forward.

Instead, Megan took my arm from around her shoulders and placed it against the wall so I could hold myself up. “You’re going to need some time to extract,” she said.

“So we should hurry.”

Megan shouldered her rifle, then faced back down the corridor.

“Megan!”

“That spot beside the rubble is defensible,” she said. “I can hold them off for a good long while. Get going.”

“But—”

“David, please. Just go.”

I took her by the shoulder, then pulled her to me and kissed her. That twisted my leg, causing pain to flare up my side, but whatever. A kiss from Megan was worth it.

I released her. And then I left, as she had said.

I felt cowardly, but part of being in a team was about recognizing when someone else could do a job better than you. And part of being a man was learning to let your immortal girlfriend take a turn being the heroic one.

I’d be back for her though, dead or not. And soon. No way was I going to leave her body to end up like those in the tubs I’d found. I stumbled up the slope, trying not to dwell on what might happen to Megan. She’d have to shoot herself once the drones overwhelmed her, as she couldn’t risk getting captured.

Behind me, Megan started firing, the rifle shots echoing in the steel hallway. The drones scuttled and clacked. Automatic weapons fire followed.

I had almost reached the exit, but I saw shadows in the sunlight outside. I was getting sick of drones. I winced as I pulled out my handgun. Fortunately, the shadows resolved into a stout black man in tight, dark clothing, night-vision goggles on his brow and a very, *very* large gun in his hands. Abraham cursed as he saw me, voice softly laced with his French accent.

“How are you?” he said, hurrying down the short slope. “And Megan?”

“She’s covering our escape,” I said. “She wants us to go without her.”

He met my eyes, then nodded, turning to walk with me the last couple of feet. “Drones outside pulled back into the complex once you were spotted,” he said. “Everyone else is at the jeeps.”

We had a chance then.

"She *is* an Epic."

I jumped, looking around. It was that voice from before. Had a drone found us?

No. A panel on the wall had turned into a display. The same shadowed figure as before was on-screen, facing us.

"David?" Abraham said, standing in the sunlight of the open roof of the exit. "Let's go."

"She is an Epic," I said instead, facing the screen. That figure…was it familiar?

A light suddenly switched on, banishing the shadows and revealing a stocky older man with a round head, bald save for some wisps of white hair that stuck up almost like a crown. I *had* seen him before. One time. In a picture of Prof's, taken years ago.

"I have seen something unbelievable today," the man said, "and it leaves me curious. You're the one they call Steelslayer, aren't you. Yes…the kid from Newcago. Don't you *kill* Epics?"

"Just the ones that deserve it," I replied.

"And Jonathan Phaedrus?"

"Jonathan Phaedrus is gone," Abraham said softly. "Only the Epic Limelight remains. We will do what needs to be done."

I didn't say anything. It wasn't that I disagreed with Abraham, but saying the words was hard for me.

The man studied us. Suddenly, the gunfire behind us fell silent. "I have recalled my machines. We need to talk."

In reply, I fainted.

7

"WE wouldn't have had this problem if you'd been willing to deal with us."

Megan's voice. Mmm…I lay in darkness, enjoying that sound, and was annoyed when the next speaker wasn't her.

"What was I supposed to do?" It was the voice of that man, the one from Knighthawk. "First I get word that Phaedrus has turned, then you *immediately* contact me and demand weapons? I wanted nothing to do with it."

"You could have guessed that we would resist him," Abraham said. "The Reckoners would not simply join with a tyrant because he was once our leader."

"You're missing my point," the man said. "I didn't turn you away because I thought you were working with him; I turned you away because I'm not a *sparking* idiot. Phaedrus knows too much about me. I'm not going to cross him *or* sell to him. I wanted nothing to do with you people."

"Then why did you invite us in here?" Megan demanded.

I groaned, forcing my eyes open. My leg ached, but it didn't hurt like I expected it to. When I shifted it, I felt only a superficial pain. But sparks. I was *exhausted.*

I blinked, my eyes struggling to focus, and a moment later Megan's head appeared above me, golden hair hanging down around her face. "David?" she asked. "How do you feel?"

"Like a piece of bread at a rock party."

She relaxed visibly and turned around. "He's all right."

“A piece of what?” the Knighthawk man’s voice asked.

“Piece of bread,” I said, sitting up with difficulty. “At a rock party. You know, because nobody wants *bread* at a *rock party.* They’ve come to see the cool rocks. So they toss the bread on the floor and it gets stomped on.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Sorry,” I grumbled. “I’m usually more eloquent after getting shot.”

I was in a dim room filled with an inordinate number of sofas, one of which I had been lying on. Another one—long, black, overstuffed—near the far wall had a low table in front of it that was covered with an array of monitors and other computer equipment, as well as a small stack of dirty plates. The Knighthawk man sat on a different sofa closer to me, near a little nightstand piled with peanut shells and two large, empty plastic cups. Beside him sat a full-sized mannequin.

Like, really. A mannequin. The type you might find in an old department store, modeling clothing. It had a completely featureless wooden face, and was dressed like the Newcago elite in a wide-brimmed hat and pinstriped suit. It had been positioned to sit in a relaxed pose, legs crossed and hands clasped.

Right…

Abraham stood in front of the sofa, arms folded, still in his black infiltration suit. He’d removed his mask—it hung from his belt—but he still wore his imposing P328 gravatonic minigun strapped to his back. Other than Megan, he was the only member of my team in the room.

“Nice place,” I said. “I assume you spent your entire decorating budget on the freaky laboratory?”

The man sniffed. “The laboratory needs to remain clean for the work I do there. I have invited you into my home, young man. A rare honor.”

“I apologize for not bringing some ceremonial stale pizza crusts as an offering,” I said, nodding to the dirty plates on the table across the room. I climbed to my feet, wobbling—although with one hand on the armrest of the couch I managed to remain upright. My leg throbbed, and I looked down to find that my pants had been sliced to get at the wound.

It was scabbed over, and looked like it had been healing for weeks, perhaps months.

“Hmm,” the man said. “Sorry that it’s not completely healed. My device isn’t as powerful as some others.”

I nodded to Megan, indicating I was all right. She didn’t offer me an

arm to lean on, not in front of an enemy, but she did remain close by.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Underneath my Foundry," the man said.

"And you are?"

"Dean Knighthawk."

I blinked. "Seriously? Like, that's your *name*?"

"No," the man said, "but my name was stupid. So I use this one instead."

Well, points to him for honesty, though my skin crawled at the idea of giving up your name. I wasn't even fond of the nickname people gave me, Steelslayer. David Charleston was good enough. My father gave me that name. These days, it was about the only thing I had left of him.

Knighthawk was indeed the man I'd seen in Prof's photo back in Babilar. The man was older now, more bald and more paunched, with jowls hanging down beside his neck, like melted cheese sloughing off the top of a piece of bread in the microwave.

He and Prof had obviously been friends, and he knew that Prof was an Epic—had known for a long while.

"You were part of Prof's first team," I guessed. "The one with Regalia and Murkwood, when all of them became Epics."

"No," Knighthawk said. "I wasn't. But my wife was."

That's right. There had been four of them, I remembered Prof saying. A woman named…Amala? There was something important about her, something I couldn't quite remember.

"I was an interested observer," Knighthawk said. "A scientist, and not the 'Hey kids, watch me freeze this grape with liquid nitrogen' type like Jonathan. A real scientist."

"And a real businessman," Abraham said. "You've built an empire upon the bodies of the dead."

Beside Knighthawk, the mannequin spread its arms apart, hands to the sides, as if to say, "Guilty as charged." I jumped, then glanced at Megan.

"Yeah," she whispered, "it moves. Haven't figured out how."

"Mizzy and Cody?" I whispered.

"Stayed outside in case this was a trap."

"I pioneered motivator technology," Knighthawk said to Abraham. "And yes, I have benefited from it. So have you. So let us not point fingers,

Mr. Desjardins."

Abraham maintained a calm expression, but he couldn't have been happy to hear Knighthawk use his last name. Even I hadn't known what it was; we didn't talk much about our pasts.

"That's great," I said, then walked by Abraham and flopped down onto the couch opposite Knighthawk and his creepy mannequin. "Again, why did you invite us in here?"

"That Epic," Knighthawk said, and his mannequin pointed at Megan, "is Firefight, isn't she? She was a dimensionalist all along?"

It wasn't exactly true. When Megan spoke of Firefight, she spoke of him externally—a being from another dimension who she could bring into ours, fleetingly. She didn't consider herself to be Firefight, though that was a small distinction.

"Yes," Megan said, stepping up and—after considering for a moment—sitting down next to me. She rested her arm along the back of the couch, exposing her underarm holster and making it easily accessible. "There's more to it, but basically…yes. I am what you say."

I rested my hand on her shoulder. Megan could be cold—part was her native personality, part was wanting to keep her distance from people because…well, Epics tended to be dangerous to get to know. I could see past that, to the tension in the way she watched Knighthawk, the way she wiggled her thumb as if cocking an imaginary revolver. Her hand had a big red blister on it where she'd grabbed the flame.

We knew how to keep the darkness at bay, but this war wasn't won yet. She was worried about what had happened to her earlier. Frankly, so was I.

Knighthawk's mannequin leaned forward in a thoughtful posture and tipped its hat back to better expose its featureless face. "What you did in the lab, young woman," Knighthawk said, "fooled all of my sensors, cameras, and programming. You aren't just any dimensionalist, you're a powerful one. My robots report scarring on the walls of the room, and some of my drones were *destroyed.* Permanently. It's like nothing I've ever seen."

"You're *not* getting my DNA," Megan said.

"Hmm?" Knighthawk said. "Oh, I already have that. I collected a dozen different samples before you two made it to the access corridor. You think you could come in here wearing anything other than a cleanroom suit and escape without me getting some of your skin cells? But you needn't worry;

I'm far from creating a motivator based on you. There is more to it than…is generally assumed."

The mannequin continued to gesture while Knighthawk talked. *But Knighthawk's not moving at all,* I noticed. *And the overstuffed couches and pillows make it seem like he's wedged into his seat.* Dean Knighthawk was at least partially paralyzed. He could talk—every word he spoke came from his own mouth—but he didn't move anything more than his head.

How could he be disabled? If he had technology to heal me, then why wouldn't he have healed himself?

"No," Knighthawk said, still addressing Megan, "I'm not interested in exploiting your powers right now, but I do want to understand them. What you did earlier was *powerful.* Incredible. The manipulation of reality is no small-scale stuff, young lady."

"I hadn't realized," she said dryly. "What are you getting at?"

"You were going to sacrifice yourself," Knighthawk said. "You stayed behind so the others could escape."

"Yeah?" Megan said. "It's not a big deal. I can survive a lot of things."

"Ah…so a High Epic?" Knighthawk said, his mannequin sitting up straighter. "I might have guessed as much."

Megan drew her lips to a line.

"Get to the point, Knighthawk," I said.

"The point is this," he replied, his mannequin waving to us. "This conversation. Such an explosive use of that woman's powers should have driven her to isolation, rage, and a supreme annoyance at anyone near to her. Jonathan is one of the few Epics I know who could control the darkness—and following the use of his powers, he would often stay away from people for days before he was under control again. Yet *this* young lady used her powers but wasn't consumed by darkness at all—as proven by the fact that she subsequently selflessly risked her life for her team."

The mannequin leaned forward.

"So," Knighthawk continued, "what's the secret?"

I looked toward Abraham, who shrugged almost imperceptibly. He didn't know if we should share the information or not. So far, we had been careful about when, and with whom, we talked about how to drive back the darkness in Epics. With this knowledge, we could accidentally tip the power structure in the Fractured States—as the secret of overcoming the darkness *also* gave away the secret to discovering Epic weaknesses.

I had half a mind to broadcast these things far and wide. If the Epics discovered one another's weaknesses, maybe they'd kill each other off. Unfortunately, the truth would probably be more brutal. Power would shift, and some Epics would rise while others fell. We might end up with one group of Epics ruling the entire continent, and be forced to deal with an organized, powerful regime instead of a network of city-states fighting one another and remaining weak because of it.

We'd want to let this knowledge out sooner or later—spread it to the lorists of the world and see if they could start turning Epics from the darkness. But first we needed to test what we'd discovered and find out if we could even make it *work* on other Epics.

I had big plans, plans to change the world, and they all started with one trap. One important hit, perhaps the hardest ever pulled by the Reckoners.

"I'll tell you the secret to turning Epics away from their madness, Knighthawk," I decided, "but I want you to promise to keep it quiet for now. And I want you to equip us. Give us what we need."

"You're going to bring him down, aren't you?" Knighthawk said. "Jonathan Phaedrus. Limelight, as they call him now. You're going to kill Prof."

"No," I said softly, meeting his eyes. "We're going to do something far, far more difficult. We're going to bring him back."

8

KNIGHTHAWK had the mannequin carry him.

I got a better look at the thing, walking beside it. It wasn't your average, everyday store mannequin. It had articulated wooden fingers and a more solid body than I had expected. It was really more of a large marionette, only without the strings.

And it was strong. It carried Knighthawk with ease, sliding its arms through straps in some kind of harness Knighthawk wore. The whole arrangement made the mannequin look like it was hugging him from behind, its arms across his stomach and chest, with Knighthawk remaining upright and strapped in place, his feet dangling a few inches off the ground.

It didn't look comfortable *or* normal. Still, Knighthawk chatted conversationally while we walked, as if it were perfectly natural for a quadriplegic to be carted around by a tall wooden golem.

"So that's basically it," I said to him as we made our way down the nondescript corridor, heading toward Knighthawk's armory. "The weaknesses are tied to fears. If an Epic confronts the fear, banishes it, then they can drive back the darkness."

"Mostly," Megan said from behind us. Abraham had gone up above to fetch Mizzy and Cody, as we'd decided that—one way or another—we were going to have to trust Knighthawk. We didn't have any other option.

Knighthawk grunted. "Fear. Seems so simple."

"Yes and no," I said. "I don't think a lot of Epics, consumed by their powers, like to think about being weak. They don't confront these things; that's basically the problem."

“I still wonder why no one else has made the connection,” Knighthawk said, sounding skeptical.

“We’ve made it,” Megan said softly. “Every Epic thinks about this, I guarantee it. It’s just that we think about it all the wrong way—we connect fears and our weakness, but we connect them in *reverse* of the truth.

“It’s the nightmares. They’re maddening. They drive you from your bed, gasping, sweating, and smelling blood. The nightmares are about your weakness. The loss of power, the return to mortality, the return to being *crassly common,* so a simple accident could end you. It makes sense that we’d be afraid of the thing that could kill us, so the nightmares seem normal in a way. But we never realized that weaknesses grew *out of* our fears—the fears came first, and then the weaknesses. Not the other way around.”

Knighthawk and I both stopped in the hallway, looking back at her. Megan met our gaze, defiant as ever, but I could see the cracks. *Sparks*…the things this woman had been forced to live with. What we’d discovered was helping her, but in some ways it was also prying those cracks wider. Exposing things inside her that she’d worked hard to cover up.

She’d done terrible things in the past, serving Steelheart. We didn’t talk about it. She’d escaped that by being forced to not use her powers while infiltrating the Reckoners.

“We can do this, Knighthawk,” I said. “We can discover Prof’s weakness, then use it against him. Only instead of killing him, we’ll lay a trap that makes him confront his fears. We’ll bring him back and *prove* that there’s another solution to the Epic problem.”

“It won’t work,” Knighthawk said. “He knows you, and he knows Reckoner protocol. Calamity—he *wrote* Reckoner protocol. He’ll be ready for you.”

“See, that’s the thing,” I said. “He knows us, yes. But *we* also know *him.* We’ll be able to figure out his weakness far more easily than with other Epics. And beyond that, we know something important.”

“Which is?” he demanded.

“Deep down,” I said, “Prof wants us to win. He’ll be ready to die, so he’ll be surprised when what we actually do is save him.”

Knighthawk regarded me. “You have a strangely persuasive way about you, young man.”

“You have *no idea,*” Megan muttered.

“We’re going to need technology to beat him though,” I said. “So I’m

eager to see what you have."

"Well, I've got a few things I could lend you," Knighthawk said, starting down the corridor again. "But contrary to what people assume, this place isn't some kind of massive repository for hidden technology. Pretty much every time I get something working, I immediately sell it. All those drones aren't cheap, you know. I have to order them out of Germany, and they're a *pain* to unpack. Speaking of which, I'm going to bill you for the ones you destroyed."

"We're here begging, Knighthawk," I said, catching up to him. "How do you expect us to pay you?"

"By all accounts you're a resourceful kid. You'll think of something. A frozen blood sample from Jonathan will do, assuming your crazy plan fails and you end up having to kill him."

"It won't fail."

"Yeah? Taking a look at the history of the Reckoners, I'd never bet money on the plan that *doesn't* intend to leave some bodies behind. But we'll see." His mannequin nodded toward Megan.

That mannequin…something about it struck me. I thought for a moment, and then it clicked in my mind like the mandibles of a giant poker-playing beetle.

"The Wooden Soul!" I said. "You got some of *her* DNA?"

Knighthawk twisted his head to look at me as we walked. "How in the world…"

"Pretty easy connection, once I thought about it. There aren't many puppeteer Epics out there."

"She lived in a remote Punjabi village!" Knighthawk said. "And has been dead for almost ten years."

"David's got a thing about Epics," Megan said from behind. "I'd call him obsessed, but that doesn't do it justice."

"It's not that," I said. "I'm like a—"

"No," Knighthawk said.

"This makes sense. I am like—"

"No, *really,*" Knighthawk interrupted. "Nobody wants to hear it, kid."

I deflated. On the floor, a little cleaning drone zipped up. It bumped into my foot in what seemed like a vindictive motion, then scuttled away.

Knighthawk's mannequin pointed at me, though it had to turn sideways to do it, as its arms were strapped into carrying Knighthawk, its hands peeking out the sides. "Obsession with the Epics isn't healthy. You need to watch yourself."

"Ironic words, coming from a man who has built his career by making use of Epic powers—and is using them right now to get around."

"And what makes you think I don't have the same obsession? Let's just say I speak from experience. Epics are strange, wonderful, and terrible all at once. Don't let yourself get drawn in by that. It can lead you to…difficult places."

Something in his voice made me think of the laboratory, with the body parts floating so casually in vats. This man wasn't quite sane.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

Together we continued down the corridor, passing an open doorway, which I couldn't help peeking into. The small room beyond was strikingly clean, with a large metal box in the center. It looked kind of like a coffin, an impression not helped by the room's dim lighting and sterile, cold smell. Past the coffin stood a large wooden display case shaped like a bookshelf with large cubbies. Each held some small item, many of which seemed to be clothing. Caps, shirts, little boxes.

The cubbies were labeled, and I could barely make out a few: *Demo, The Abstract Man, Blastweave…*

The names of Epics. Perhaps those freezer chests were where Knighthawk kept his DNA samples, but this was where he kept his trophies. Curiously, one of the largest cubbies had no plaque, only a vest and what looked like a pair of gloves, set out prominently for display with their own spotlight.

"You won't find motivators in there," Knighthawk noted. "Just… mementos."

"And how would I find motivators?" I asked, looking to Knighthawk. "What are they really, Knighthawk?"

Knighthawk smiled. "You have no idea how hard it has been to keep people from figuring out the answer to that, kid. Trick is, I need people out there to collect material for me, but I don't want Joe and Sally knowing how to make their own motivators. That means misinformation. Half truths."

"You aren't the only one who makes these things, Knighthawk," Megan said, stepping up beside us. "Romerocorp does it, as does ITC over in

London. It's not some grand secret."

"Oh, but it is," Knighthawk said. "The other companies know how important it is to keep that secret, you see. I don't think even Jonathan knows the whole truth of it." He smiled as he hung limply from his mannequin's arms. I was getting tired of that smirk already.

The mannequin turned and headed down the hall toward another door.

"Wait," I said, hurrying after him. "We're not going in that room with the mementos?"

"Nope," Knighthawk said. "No food in there." His mannequin pushed open this second door, and I could see a stove and refrigerator beyond, though the linoleum floor and slablike table in the center made it feel more like the cafeteria back at the Factory than a kitchen.

I glanced at Megan as she joined me in the hallway, right outside the door. The mannequin went inside and deposited Knighthawk into an overstuffed easy chair beside a table. Then it crossed to the refrigerator, rummaging for something I couldn't see.

"I *could* do with a bite," she noted.

"Doesn't all this feel a little morbid to you?" I asked softly. "We're talking about machines made from the corpses of your people, Megan."

"It's not like I'm a different species. I'm still human."

"You have different DNA though."

"And I'm still human. Don't try to understand it. It will drive you crazy."

It was a common sentiment; trying to explain Epics with science was maddening at best. When America had passed the Capitulation Act, which declared Epics exempt from the legal system, one senator had explained that we shouldn't expect human laws to be able to bind them when they didn't even obey the laws of *physics.*

But, call me a fool, I still wanted to understand. I *needed* it to make sense.

I looked at Megan. "I don't care what you are, as long as you're you, Megan. But I don't like the way we use corpses without understanding what we're doing to them, or how it all works."

"Then we'll pry it out of him," she whispered, drawing close. "You're right, motivators might be important. What if the way they work is related to the weaknesses, or the fears?"

I nodded.

More sounds came from the kitchen. Popcorn? I looked in, surprised to see Knighthawk relaxing in his easy chair while his mannequin stood next to the microwave popping popcorn.

"Popcorn?" I called to him. "For *breakfast*?"

"The apocalypse hit us over a decade ago, kid," he called back. "We live in a frontier, a wasteland."

"And that has to do with this how?"

"Means social mores are dead and buried," he said. "Good riddance. I'll eat whatever I sparking want for breakfast."

I went to go in, but Megan caught me by the shoulder, leaning closer. She smelled like smoke—like detonated ordnance, gunpowder from spent bullet casings, and burning wood from a forest set aflame. It was a wonderful, heady scent, better than any perfume.

"What was it you were going to say earlier?" she asked. "When you were talking about yourself and Knighthawk cut you off, wouldn't let you finish?"

"It was nothing. Just me being stupid."

Megan held on, meeting my eyes, waiting.

I sighed. "You were talking about how obsessed I am. And that's not it. I'm like…well, I'm like a room-sized, steam-powered, robotic toenail-clipping machine."

She cocked an eyebrow.

"I can basically do only one thing," I explained, "but damn it, I'm going to do that one thing really, really *well*."

Megan smiled. A beautiful sight. She kissed me then, for some reason. "I love you, David Charleston."

I grinned. "You sure you can love a giant robotic toenail clipper?"

"You're you, whatever you are," she said. "And that's what matters." She paused. "But please don't grow to room-sized. That would be awkward."

She let go, and we entered the kitchen to discuss the fate of the world over popcorn.

9

WE settled down at the large table. It had a fancy glass top that revealed black slate underneath. There was a majestic sense to it, which seemed completely at odds with the peeling linoleum and faded paint of the kitchen. Knighthawk's mannequin sat primly on a stool next to the man's large chair, then began to feed him pieces of popcorn one at a time.

I had no more than fuzzy knowledge of the Wooden Soul, the Epic from whom he'd stolen powers to create such a servant. Supposedly she'd been able to control marionettes with her mind. Which meant this thing in the suit wasn't autonomous; it was more like an extra set of limbs for Knighthawk to use. Likely he wore some kind of device with a motivator that gave him the ability to control the mannequin.

Voices outside the room announced new arrivals. A little drone scuttled in on the floor—Knighthawk had sent it to lead Abraham, and perhaps to keep him from poking into places he didn't belong. Soon afterward, the tall Canadian man entered and nodded to us.

The other two members of my team followed him. Cody appeared first, a lanky man in his late thirties. He wore a camouflage hunting jacket and cap—though not specifically for this mission. He basically always wore camo. He hadn't shaved in days, which he'd explained was a "true Highlander tradition used to prepare for battle."

"Is that popcorn?" he asked in his strong Southern drawl. He walked over and snatched a handful from the bowl right out of the mannequin's hand. "Brilliant! Boy, Abraham, you weren't kidding 'bout the creepy wooden robot thing."

Mizzy bounced in behind him. Dark-skinned and slight of build, she wore her wild curly hair pulled back so that it exploded in an enormous puff, kind of like an Afro mushroom cloud. She took a place at the table as far from Megan as possible, and shot me an encouraging smile.

I tried not to think of the missing team members. Val and Exel, dead at Prof's hand. Tia, lost somewhere, probably dead as well. Though we were usually silent about such things, Abraham had confided in me that he'd known of two other Reckoner cells. He'd tried to contact them while fleeing Newcago, but he'd had no response. It seemed Prof had gotten to them first.

Cody crunched down his handful of popcorn. "How does a fellow score some more of this? Don't know if y'all realize, but we've had an exhausting day."

"Yes," Knighthawk said, "an exhausting morning spent attacking my home and trying to rob me."

"Now, now," Cody said. "Don't be sore. Why, in parts of the old country, it's considered *polite* to introduce yourself with a fist to the face. Yes indeed, a man won't think you're serious unless you come in swinging."

"Dare I ask…," Knighthawk said. "Of what old country do you speak?"

"He thinks he's Scottish," Abraham said.

"I *am* Scottish, ya big slab of doubt and monotony," Cody said, climbing from his chair—apparently determined to fix his own popcorn, since nobody had offered to do it for him.

"Name one city in Scotland," Abraham said, "other than Edinburgh."

"Ah yes, the Burgh of Edin," Cody said. "Where they buried old Adam and Eve, who were—naturally—Scots."

"Naturally," Abraham said. "A city name, please?"

"That's easy. I can name a ton. London. Paris. Dublin."

"Those—"

"—are *completely* Scottish," Cody said. "We founded them, you see, and then those other folks up and stole them from us. Y'all need to learn your history. Want some popcorn?"

"No. Thank you," Abraham said, giving me a bemused smile.

I leaned toward Knighthawk. "You promised us technology."

"*Promised* is a strong word, kid."

"I want that healing device," Abraham said.

"The harmsway? Not a chance. I don't have a backup."

"You call it that too?" Megan asked, frowning.

"One of Jonathan's old jokes," Knighthawk said, his mannequin shrugging. "It just stuck. Anyway, mine isn't nearly as efficient as Jonathan's own healing powers. It's all I got though, and you aren't taking it. But I have two other bits of fun I can lend you. One—"

"Wait," Mizzy said. "You've got a healing machine, and you still walk around with Smiles McCreepy there? Why not, you know, fix your *legs*?"

Knighthawk gave her a flat stare, and his mannequin shook its head. As if asking about his disability broke some kind of taboo.

"How much do you know about Epic healing, young lady?" he asked.

"Weeellll," Mizzy said, "the Epics we kill tend to stay pretty dead. So I don't get to see healing often."

"Epic healing," Knighthawk said, "doesn't change your DNA or your immune system. It merely fixes damage to cells. My current state is not the result of an accident; if it were no more than a severed spinal cord, I'd be fine. The problem runs far deeper, and while I've found that healing returns some sensation in my limbs, they soon degrade again. So I use Manny instead."

"You…named it?" Abraham asked.

"Sure. Why not? Look, I'm starting to think you don't want me to give you this tech after all."

"We do," I said. "Please, continue."

He rolled his eyes, then accepted another piece of popcorn from his marionette's hand. "So, a few months back, an Epic died in Siberia. A squabble between two despots, kind of dramatic. An enterprising merchant was in the area, and managed to harvest one of the—"

"Rtich?" I said, perking up. "You managed to emulate *Rtich*?"

"Kid, you know far too much about all this for your own good."

I ignored the comment. Rtich—pronounced something like "r'teech"—had been a powerful Epic. I'd been looking for something that would let us go toe-to-toe with Prof. We needed an edge, something he wouldn't expect—

Megan elbowed me in the stomach. "Well? Gonna share?"

"Oh!" I said, noticing that Knighthawk had stopped his explanation. "Well, Rtich was a Russian Epic with a very eclectic set of abilities. She wasn't technically a High Epic, but she was very powerful. Are we talking

about her entire portfolio, Knighthawk?"

"Each motivator can only provide one ability," he said.

"Well," I said, standing, "then I assume in this case, you emulated her quicksilver globe. Why are we sitting here? Let's go get it! I want to try it out."

"Hey, Scotsman," Knighthawk said, "will you get me a cola out of the fridge while you're up?"

"Sure," Cody said, pouring a fresh batch of popcorn into a bowl. He reached over and fished a cola from the fridge, the same brand that Tia had liked.

"Oh," Knighthawk added, "and that bin of potato salad."

"Potato salad and popcorn?" Cody asked. "You're a weird dude, if you don't mind me saying." He walked over and slid the translucent bin across the table, cola on top. Then he plopped down beside Mizzy and put his feet—work boots—up on the table, leaning back in his chair and attacking his bowl of food like a man whose house had once been burned down by a particularly violent ear of corn.

I remained standing, hoping everyone else would join me. I didn't want to sit around and *talk* about Epic powers. I wanted to *use* them. And this specific ability should prove to be as exciting as the spyril, but without the water, which I was totally up for. I might have been willing to let the depths consume me in order to save my friends, but that didn't mean water and I *liked* one another. We had more of a truce.

"Well?" I urged.

Knighthawk's mannequin popped open the bin of potato salad. There, sitting in the middle of the stuff, was a little black box. "It's right here."

"You keep your priceless super power devices," Megan said flatly, "in the potato salad."

"Do you know how many times people have broken in to rob me?" Knighthawk asked.

"Never successfully," I said. "Everyone knows this place is impregnable."

Knighthawk snorted. "Kid, we live in a world where people can *literally* walk through walls. No place is impregnable; I'm just good at telling lies. I mean, even *you* people managed to snitch a few things from me—though you'll find that the ones Abraham grabbed are mostly useless. One creates the sound of a dog barking, and another makes fingernails grow faster—but

not any stronger. Not every Epic power is amazing, though I'd like those two back anyway. They make good decoys."

"Decoys?" Abraham asked, surprised.

"Sure, sure," Knighthawk said. "Always got to leave a few things out so people feel like they're grabbing something useful for their efforts. I have this whole routine—furious they've robbed me, swearing to get vengeance. Blah blah. Usually makes them leave me alone, happy to have gotten what they did. Anyway, across dozens of break-ins, you want to guess how many people thought to look in the potato salad bin?"

His mannequin dug the little box out and set it on the table—he'd packed it in a watertight bag, at least—and I sat back down to admire it, imagining the possibilities.

"How do you get the fairies inside something that small?" Cody asked, pointing at the device. "Doesn't it crush their wee wings?"

We all pointedly ignored him.

"You mentioned another piece of technology?" Abraham said.

"Yeah," Knighthawk said, "I've got an old crystal grower lying around here somewhere. Attach it to a pure crystal lattice, and you can grow new formations in seconds. That might be handy."

"Uh," Mizzy said, raising her hand. "Anyone else confused as to why, exactly, we'd want something like that? Sounds cool and all, but…crystals?"

"Well, you see," Knighthawk said, "salt is a crystal."

We all looked at him, stupefied.

"You *are* going to chase down Jonathan, right?" Knighthawk said. "And you're aware he's in Atlanta?"

Atlanta. I settled back into my seat. Atlanta would be under the jurisdiction of the Coven, a loose affiliation of Epics who had basically promised not to bother one another. Occasionally one would help another murder a rival who tried to steal their city—which for Epics was practically like being best buddies.

But for all I knew of Epics, my knowledge of the world was spotty. The nature of Babilar, with its glowing fruit and surreal paints, had taken me completely by surprise. I was still at my core a sheltered kid who'd never left his home neighborhood before a few months ago.

"Atlanta," Abraham said softly. "Or what is now Ildithia. Where is it currently?"

“Somewhere in eastern Kansas,” Knighthawk said.

Kansas? I thought, the comment jarring my memory. *That’s right. Ildithia moves.* But so far? I’d read about it moving, but had assumed it stayed in the same general region.

“Why is he there though?” Abraham asked. “What is there for Jonathan Phaedrus in the city of salt?”

“How should I know?” Knighthawk said. “I’m doing my best to avoid drawing the man’s attention. I watched where he went for self-preservation’s sake, but there’s no way in Calamity that I’m going to start poking him with a stick.”

Knighthawk’s mannequin set down the bowl. “I’m out of popcorn, which means it’s time to attach some strings to this little gift of mine. You can take the rtich and the crystal grower on the condition that you get out of here now, and you *don’t* contact me anymore. Don’t mention me to Jonathan; don’t even talk about me to one another, in case he overhears. He likes things done right. If he comes here for me, he’ll leave a smoldering hole and not much else.”

I looked toward Megan, who was staring at Knighthawk, unblinking, lips downturned. “You know we have the secret,” she said softly to him. “You know we’re close to answers. A real solution.”

“Which is why I’m helping you in the first place.”

“Halfway,” Megan accused him. “You’re willing to toss a grenade into the room, but you don’t want to look and see if it did the job or not. You know that something needs to change in this world, but *you* don’t want to have to change with it. You’re lazy.”

“I’m a realist,” Knighthawk said, his mannequin standing up. “I take the world as it is, and do what I can to survive in it. Even giving you these two devices will be dangerous for me; Jonathan will recognize my handiwork. Hopefully he’ll think you got them off an arms dealer.”

The mannequin walked to the fridge and removed a few other items, dropping some in a sack. He set one on the table for us; it looked like a tub of mayonnaise, but when he pried off the top, inside was another small device settled into the gooey condiment. The mannequin slung the sack by a strap over its arm, then walked over to lift Knighthawk from behind.

“I have other questions,” I said, rising.

“Too bad,” Knighthawk said.

"You have other technology you could give us," Abraham said, pointing at the sack. "The ones you've given us are only what you think won't get you in too much trouble with Prof."

"Good guess, and you're right," Knighthawk replied. "Get out. I'll send a bill with a drone. If you survive, I expect it to be paid."

"We're trying to save the world, you know," Mizzy said. "That *includes* you."

Knighthawk snorted. "You realize that half the people who come to me are trying to save the world? Hell, I've worked with the Reckoners before, and you're *always* trying to save the world. Looks pretty unsaved to me so far; in fact, looks a fair bit *worse* now that Jonathan has flipped.

"If I'd given you things for free all along, I'd have gone bankrupt years ago, and you wouldn't even have had the *option* of coming to try to rob me. So don't climb up on a high horse and spit platitudes at me."

And then the mannequin turned and walked out. I stood at my chair, feeling frustrated, and looked back at the others. "Did that exit feel abrupt to any of you?"

"Did you miss the part about him being a really weird dude?" Cody asked, nudging the potato salad bin with his foot.

"At least we got something," Abraham said, turning one of the small boxes over in his hands. "This puts us in a far better position than where we began—and beyond that, we know where Jonathan has set up base."

"Yeah," I said, glancing at Megan, who seemed troubled. So she felt it too. We'd gotten some weapons, sure, but we'd missed an opportunity for answers.

"Grab that stuff," I said. "Cody, search the fridge just in case. Then let's get out of here."

The group moved to do as instructed, and I found myself staring out the door and into the hallway. There were still too many questions.

"So…," Megan said, joining me. "You want me to guide the rest of the team out?"

"Hmm?" I asked.

"Remember how you chased Prof and us into the understreets of Newcago, after *expressly* being told you'd be shot if you didn't stay put?"

I smiled. "Yeah. Back then, I figured getting shot by the Reckoners would be *so cool.* Think about showing off a bullet scar to your friends, and saying that *Jonathan Phaedrus* himself shot you."

“You’re such a nerd. My point is, are you going after Knighthawk?”

“Of course I’m going after him,” I said. “Make sure everyone gets out safely, then try to save me from my stupidity if this goes sour.” I gave her a swift kiss, caught my rifle as Abraham tossed it to me, then went to chase down Knighthawk.

10

I didn't have to search far.

The hallway was empty, but I stepped up to the room we'd passed earlier—the one with the trophies on the back wall—and peeked in. I was unsurprised to find Knighthawk sitting in an easy chair on the far side of the room. A gas fireplace crackled beside him, and his mannequin lay, its invisible strings cut, on the ground beside it.

At first that worried me. Was Knighthawk all right?

Then I saw his eyes—reflecting the writhing flames—staring at the silvery box in the center of the room, the one that looked like a coffin. As a tear rolled down Knighthawk's cheek, I realized the man had probably wanted to be alone, without even the mannequin's silent gaze upon him.

"Prof killed her, didn't he?" I whispered. "Your wife. She went evil, and Prof had to kill her."

I finally remembered the details of a conversation I'd had with Prof weeks ago, right outside Babilar, in a little bunker where he'd been doing science experiments. He'd told me about his team of friends, Epics every one. Him, Regalia, Murkwood, and Amala. Over time, three of them had eventually gone evil.

Sparks. *Four* of them, when you included Prof.

It doesn't work, David, he'd said. *It's destroying me….*

"You don't listen to instructions very well, do you, boy?" Knighthawk asked.

I slipped into the room and walked to the coffin. Part of the lid was translucent, and I could see a pretty face lying peacefully inside, golden hair

fanned out behind.

"She tried so hard to resist it," Knighthawk said. "Then one morning, I got up and…and she was gone. She'd been awake all night, judging by the six empty cups of coffee she'd left. She'd been afraid to sleep."

"Nightmares," I whispered, resting my fingers on the glass of the coffin.

"I think the stress of being up all night snapped her. My dear Amala. Jonathan did us both a favor in hunting her down. I *must* see it that way. Like you should discard this foolish notion you have of saving him. End him, kid. For his own good, and for all of us."

I looked up from the coffin toward Knighthawk. He hadn't wiped away that tear. He couldn't.

"You have hope," I said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have invited us in. You saw the way Megan was acting, and your first thought was that we'd found some way to beat the darkness."

"Maybe I invited you in out of pity," Knighthawk said. "Pity for someone who obviously loves an Epic. Like I did. Like Tia did. Maybe I invited you in to give you a warning. Be ready for it, kid. One morning you'll get up, and she'll just be gone."

I crossed the room, rifle over my shoulder, and reached for Knighthawk. I wasn't prepared for how quickly his mannequin could move. It leaped to its feet, catching me by the arm before I rested my hand on Knighthawk's shoulder.

His eyes flickered to my hand, apparently deciding I hadn't intended to harm him, and the mannequin released me. Sparks, its grip was *strong*.

That let my hand fall on his shoulder, and I squatted down before his chair. "I'm going to beat this, Knighthawk, but I need answers only you can give me. About motivators, and how they work."

"Foolishness," he said.

"You kept Amala in stasis. Why?"

"Because I'm foolish too. She had a hole the size of Jonathan's fist in her chest when I found her. Dead. Pretending otherwise is stupid."

"Yet you healed her body," I said. "And preserved her."

"You see those?" he said, nodding to the far side of the room. To the remnants from fallen Epics. "Those powers didn't bring her back. Each is from an Epic with healing powers that I made a motivator out of. None worked. There is no answer. There is no secret. We live with the world as it is."

"Calamity is an Epic," I whispered.

Knighthawk started, then tore his eyes away from the wall, focusing on me again. *"What?"*

"Calamity," I repeated, "*is an Epic.* A…person. Regalia discovered the truth, even talked to him or her. This thing that destroyed our lives, it's not a force of nature. Not a star, or a comet…it's a *person.*" I took a deep breath. "And I'm going to kill Calamity."

"Holy *hell,* kid," Knighthawk said.

"Saving Prof is step one," I said. "We're going to need his abilities to pull this off. But after that, I'm going to get up there, and I'm going to *destroy* that thing. We'll return the world to the way it was before Calamity rose."

"You're absolutely insane."

"Well, I spent some time drifting after killing Steelheart," I said. "I needed a new purpose in life. Figure I might as well aim high."

Knighthawk stared at me, then kicked his head back and laughed loudly. "I never thought I'd meet someone with more ambition than Jonathan, kid. *Kill* Calamity! Why not? Sounds simple!"

I looked toward the mannequin; it had grabbed its belly and was rocking back and forth as if it were laughing.

"So," I said. "You going to help me?"

"What do you know about Epics who were born as identical twins?" Knighthawk asked as the mannequin reached over and wiped the man's cheeks. Tears of laughter had joined the one he'd shed for his wife.

"There's only one set, as far as I know. The Creer boys, Hanjah and the Mad Pen, in the Coven. They've been active lately in…Charleston, isn't it?"

"Good, good," Knighthawk replied. "You do know your stuff. You want a seat? You look uncomfortable."

The mannequin pulled over a stool for me and I sat.

"Those two go all the way back," Knighthawk explained, "to about a year after Calamity, around the time that Prof and the others got their powers. First wave, you lorists call it. And they're what started some of us thinking about how the powers worked. They have—"

"—the exact same power set," I said. "Air pressure control, pain manipulation, precognition."

"Yup," Knighthawk said. "And you know what, they *aren't* the only pair of twin Epics. They're merely the only pair where one didn't kill the other."

"That's not possible," I said. "I'd have known about them."

"Yeah, well, my associates and I made sure nobody heard of the others. Because in them was a secret."

"Each set of twins had the same abilities," I guessed. "Twins share a power set."

Knighthawk nodded.

"So it *is* genetic, somehow."

"Yes and no," Knighthawk said. "We can't find anything genetic about Epics that gives clues to their powers. That mumbo-jumbo about mitochondria? We made it up; seemed plausible, since Epic DNA tends to degrade quickly. Everything else you've heard about motivators is technobabble we use to confuse those who might be trying to figure out how to compete with us."

"Then how?"

"You realize that by telling you, I'd be breaking an agreement I have with the other companies."

"Which I appreciate."

He cocked an eyebrow at me, and his mannequin folded its arms.

"If there's even the slightest chance that I'm right," I said, "and I can stop the Epics forever, isn't it worth the risk?"

"Yes," Knighthawk said. "But I still want a promise out of you, kid. You don't share this secret."

"It's wrong of you to keep it," I said. "Perhaps if the governments of the world had possessed this knowledge, they'd have been able to fight back against the Epics."

"Too late," he said. "Your word."

I shook my head. "Fine. I'll tell my team, but I'll swear them to secrecy too. We won't tell anyone else."

He thought about that for a moment, then sighed. "Cell cultures."

"Cell…what?"

"Cell cultures," he said. "You know, when you take a sample of cells and keep them growing in a lab? That's the answer. Grab an Epic's cells, stick them in a test tube with some nutrients, and run power through them.

Boom. You can emulate that Epic's powers."

"You're kidding," I said.

"Nope."

"It can't be that easy."

"It's not *easy* at all," Knighthawk said. "The voltage of the electricity determines which power you get out. You have to be ready to channel it properly, or you could blow yourself—hell, the entire *state*—to the moon. Most of our experimentation, all of this equipment, is based on harnessing the abilities that come off the cells."

"Huh," I said. "So you're saying that Calamity can't distinguish between an actual person and a pile of cells?" That was a strange mistake for an intelligent being to make.

"Eh," Knighthawk said. "More like they just don't care. If Calamity *is* an Epic, I mean. Besides, maybe there's some kind of interaction with motivators we don't understand. Truth is, those things can be touchy, even in the best of cases. Once in a while, a power simply won't *work* for someone. Everyone else can use it fine, but one person can't operate the device.

"It happens more often to Epics. Jonathan proved that Epics could use motivators, but occasionally we'd run into one that he couldn't operate. Same goes for two different motivators being used by the same person. Sometimes they interfere and one craps out."

I sat back on the stool, thoughtful. "Cell cultures. Huh. Makes sense, I suppose, but it seems…so simple."

"The best secrets usually are," he said. "But it's simple only in retrospect. Do you know how long it took scientists in pre-Calamity days to figure out how to make cultures of normal human cells? It was a strikingly difficult process. Well, same with motivators. We slaved to create the first ones. What you call a motivator is really a little incubator. The motivator feeds the cells, regulates temperature, expels waste. A good motivator will last decades, if built right."

"Regalia knew your secret," I said. "She took Obliteration and used his cells to create a bomb."

Knighthawk was silent. When I looked at him, his mannequin had settled against the wall, hands behind its back, head down as if uncertain.

"What?" I asked.

"Making motivators from Epics who are still alive is dangerous."

"For the Epic?"

"Sparks, no, for *you.* They can feel it when their powers are used by someone else. It's terribly painful, and they get a sense for where it's happening. Naturally, they seek out the source of the pain and destroy it."

"That's where the twins come in," I said. "You said…"

"One almost always kills the other," he said. "One would be in pain whenever the other used their powers. It's why I don't make motivators out of living Epics. It's a bad, bad idea."

"Yeah, well, from what I know of Obliteration, he probably enjoyed the pain. He's like a cat."

"A…cat?"

"Yeah. A freaky, messed-up, scripture-quoting cat who loves to be hurt." I cocked my head. "What? You think he's more like a ferret? I could see that. But Regalia. She performed surgery on Obliteration. Wouldn't she just need a blood sample?"

Knighthawk's mannequin waved dismissively. "Old trick. Used it myself before I decided to stop making motivators from living Epics; helps keep them from realizing how simple it all is. Either way, you have the secret. Maybe it will help; I don't know. But can you leave me to my grief now?"

I climbed to my feet, suddenly very tired. Lingering effects of my healing earlier, perhaps. "Do you know Prof's weakness?"

Knighthawk shook his head. "No idea."

"Are you lying?"

Knighthawk snorted. "No, I'm not. He never let me know what it was, and every guess I had turned out to be wrong. Ask Tia. He might have told her."

"I think Tia's dead."

"Damn." Knighthawk grew quiet, and his gaze seemed distant. I'd hoped that the secret of the motivators would shed light on Prof and what he did by gifting his powers to others. I still didn't have an answer to why some Epics could avoid the darkness that way.

Unless they actually can't, I thought. I needed to talk to Edmund, the one called Conflux.

I walked toward the door, passing the dead Epic in the coffin. I quietly hoped Knighthawk never found a way to bring this woman back; I doubted he'd get what he wanted from the reunion.

“Steelslayer,” he called after me.

I turned, and the mannequin approached, carrying a small device on one palm. It looked like a cylindrical battery, of the old bulky style I’d seen in toy commercials during recordings shown after dinner in the Factory. We kids had loved the commercials. They’d somehow seemed more real—more a picture of life in the world before Epics—than the action shows they’d interrupted.

Oh, to live in a world where children ate colorful breakfast cereals and begged their parents for toys.

“What is it?” I asked, taking the device from the mannequin.

“Tissue sample incubator,” he said. “It will keep cells fresh long enough for you to send them to me. When you fail, and have to kill Jonathan, get me a sample of his DNA.”

“So you can make some kind of device, enslaving his cells to enrich you?”

“Jonathan Phaedrus has the most powerful healing abilities of any Epic I’ve ever known,” Knighthawk said as the mannequin made a rude gesture at me. “He’ll create a harmsway far more capable than any I’ve ever tested. It might…it might work on Amala. I haven’t tried anything on her for well over a year. But maybe…I don’t know. Either way, you should let Jonathan keep healing people after he dies. You know it’s what he’d want.”

I made no promises, but I did take the incubator.

You never knew what might come in handy.

PART TWO

11

I was somewhere cold and dark.

My world was only sounds. Each one horrible, an assault, a scream. I curled up before the barrage, but then the lights attacked. Garish, terrible. *Violent.* I hated them, though that did nothing. I wept, but this too terrified me; my own body betraying me with an assault from within, to pair with all of those from without.

It built to a climax of booms, and flashes, and burning, and crashes, and screeches, and terrible explosions until—

I woke.

I had curled up awkwardly in the back seat of one of the jeeps. We were traveling on a broken highway through the night. The vehicle thumped and jostled as we sped toward Atlanta.

I blinked drowsy eyes, trying to make sense of the dream. A nightmare? My heart was certainly racing. I could remember being absolutely terrified of the noise and confusion, but it hadn't been like any other nightmare I'd experienced.

No water. I vaguely remembered a few nightmares from my time in Babilar, and they'd always involved drowning. I sat back, contemplating. After what we'd discovered about Epics, I couldn't ignore any bad dreams. But where did that leave me? People were still going to have nightmares. How could you tell if one was important, or no more than a random dream?

Well, I *wasn't* an Epic. So it probably didn't matter.

I stretched and yawned. "How are we doing?"

"Good progress tonight," Abraham said from the front passenger seat.

“Less rubble on the roads out here.”

We traveled at night when possible, spread across two jeeps, with lights off, navigating by night-vision goggles. We changed around who was riding where every few hours at Abraham’s suggestion; he said that it helped keep conversation fresh and drivers alert. Everyone took a turn driving except me. Which was completely unfair. Just because of that one time. Well, and that other time. And the one with the mailbox, but seriously, who remembered that anymore?

Right now, Mizzy and Abraham were in my jeep, while Megan and Cody drove in the other. I pulled out my rifle, which I’d stashed at my feet. A touch collapsed the stock, and I could use the night vision and thermal scope to get a look outside.

Abraham was right. This highway, though broken up in places, was in generally better shape than the one we’d taken from Newcago to Babilar, and *way* better than the one we’d taken to Knighthawk’s place. We passed derelict cars on the side of the road, and none of the towns in the area were lit—either because they were abandoned, or any inhabitants didn’t want to draw the attention of Epics. I figured the former was more likely. People would gravitate toward one of the larger cities, where they would have to be ruled by Epics but also have some access to the necessities of life.

Terrible as Newcago had been, it had still provided a relatively stable life. Packaged foods out of one of the operating factories, clean water, electricity. It wasn’t colored fruit cereal, but it beat living in a wasteland. Plus, when it came to Epics, in the city you were like a school of fish—too insignificant to be singled out, you simply hoped not to get killed in a random act of anger.

I eventually caught sight of an old green roadway sign proclaiming that we weren’t far from Kansas City. We’d go around that, as Epics reigned there, most notably Hardcore. Atlanta’s current position wasn’t far beyond it, fortunately. Riding in the backs of these cars was none too comfortable. Sparks, this country had been *big* before everything fell apart.

I got out my mobile. It sure felt good to be using one of these again, though I’d needed to dial the screen brightness way down so it didn’t illuminate our car. I typed in a message to Megan.

Kiss.

A second later the mobile blinked, and I checked the response.

Gag.

I frowned until I noticed the text wasn't from Megan, but from a number I didn't know.

Knighthawk? I texted back, guessing.

Well, technically it's Manny, my mannequin, came the reply. *But yes—and also, yes, I'm monitoring your communications. Deal with it.*

You realize everyone claims your mobiles are completely secure, I wrote.

Then everyone is an idiot, he replied. *Of course I can read what you send.*

And if Prof kills me and takes this phone? I asked. *Aren't you worried he'll notice you texted me?*

In response, the texts from him vanished, as did my replies. Sparks. He could hack my phone's memory?

Remember our deal, a new text said. *I want his cells.*

I hadn't made any such deal, but there was no use mentioning that now. I jotted down his number on a piece of paper, then watched as—sure enough—this latest text from him faded. A few moments later, a text came from Megan.

Kiss back, Knees.

Everything all right over there? I asked.

If by "all right" you mean me going insane having to listen to Cody make up story after story, then yes.

I sent her a smile.

You realize he's claiming to have been in the Olympics, she sent. *But a leprechaun stole his medal.*

Wait for the pun, I texted her. *There's usually a terrible one at the end.*

I'm riding with Abraham next leg, she said. *Seriously. I thought I'd gotten over feeling like I need to strangle members of this team. Turns out my desire to murder Cody in a violent, dehumanizing fashion had nothing to do with the darkness. It was completely natural.*

Hmm, I texted back. *We might want to check and see if anything Cody is doing is related specifically to your psyche. There's a chance, though slight, that if facing your fears can dampen the darkness, other environmental stimuli might enrage it.*

A few moments passed.

Nerd, the text finally returned.

I'm just trying to consider all possibilities.

Really, she sent back, *why couldn't I end up dating a guy with a *useful* obsession?*

I smiled. *Like what?*

Romance novels? Make-out techniques? Boyfriend stuff. Maybe then you'd compliment me for something other than my choice in sidearms.

Sorry, I sent. *I don't have a lot of experience in this area.*

You don't need to tell me, she sent back. *Seriously, David, it's a good thing you have such a nice butt.*

You realize Knighthawk is probably monitoring this conversation, I warned her.

Well, his butt is pretty damn ugly, she sent, *so why should I care?*

We hit a rough patch, bumping and jostling. Mizzy slowed, navigating us around it. *Do you miss Newcago?* I found myself asking Megan. *I do sometimes. Strange, eh?*

Nah, she wrote. *It's where you grew up. Where your family was from. I miss Portland sometimes. Last place I lived a normal life. I even had a doll. Esmeralda. Had to leave her.*

I cocked my head. Megan didn't talk about those times much.

If I'm truly cured, she wrote to me, *I can start looking for them. Once I know for certain.*

Your family? I wrote. *Any idea what city they're in?*

If I know them, they're not in a city, Megan wrote. *There are more people than you think, living out there in that darkness. Surviving. I'd bet they outnumber the people in the cities; you just don't see them.*

I doubted that. I mean, would that many people really be so invisible? And what happened when one of them turned into an Epic? New Epics tended to lose control immediately after obtaining their powers. The results were often…unsightly.

You know what galls me most about all this? Megan sent. *That my stupid father was right. All his crazy talk about an apocalypse, training his daughters to shoot, preparing for the worst…he was right. He thought it would be nuclear, but close enough.*

No more came, and I left her alone with her thoughts. A short time later, Mizzy slowed down. "I need a break," she said. "Wanna switch, Abe?"

"If you are so inclined," he said.

"I'm inclined. Way inclined."

Looks like we're stopping to change drivers, I sent to Megan. *Mile marker…32.*

We're ahead of you a few miles, she sent. *I'll tell Cody to slow down until you catch up. We're almost to the city anyway.*

We pulled over behind an old semi-truck trailer, the cab nowhere to be seen. I inspected it with the scope, noting the remains of a long-cold fire inside.

"I need to stretch my legs," Abraham said. "David, cover please?"

"Sure thing," I said, loading my rifle. He went for a short stroll, and I stood up out the jeep's open roof so I could survey, in case someone or something was hiding in the tall grass beside the roadway. Mizzy slid over to the passenger seat, reclined her chair, and sighed in satisfaction.

"You sure about this plan, David?" Mizzy asked.

"No, but it's the best one we've got."

"Other than straight-up killing Prof," she said softly.

"You too?" I said. "Knighthawk also said we should kill him."

"You know it's what he'd want, David. I mean, he'd be all stern-faced and 'Don't you try to save me, now. Do what needs to be done.' " She fell quiet. "He killed Val, David. He *murdered* her and Exel."

"That wasn't his fault," I said quickly. "We've been over this."

"Yeaaah, I know. It's just…you never gave Steelheart a second chance, right? Too dangerous. You needed to save the city. Get your vengeance. Why's it so different here?"

I turned my scope toward a rustling bunch of weeds, until a feral cat popped out and scurried away.

"This conversation isn't really about Prof, is it?" I asked Mizzy.

"Maybe not," she admitted. "I know things are different now. We know the secret to the weaknesses, blah blah. But I keep thinking…why do *you* get revenge, but not me? What about *my* feelings, *my* anger?" She bounced her head against the headrest of her seat a few times. "Blaaaahhhhh. That sounds so whiny. 'Gee, David. I'd really like to murder your girlfriend. Why won't you let me?' Sorry."

"I understand the emotion, Mizzy," I said. "I truly do. And don't think a big piece of me doesn't feel guilty for spending so long trying to kill Epics,

only to end up with Megan. Who would have thought that love and hate would be so similar, you know?"

"Who?" Mizzy said. "Like, basically every philosopher to ever live."

"What, really?"

"Yeaaah. Bunch of rock songs too."

"Wow."

"You know, the fact that you were educated in a gun factory kinda shows sometimes, David."

Abraham finished his business and walked back toward the jeep. I felt like I should give more of an answer to Mizzy, but what could I say? "We're not doing this merely because we like Prof, or because of my feelings for Megan," I said softly, climbing down into my seat. "We're doing this—going to Ildithia to rescue Prof—because we're *losing,* Mizzy. The Reckoners were the only ones who ever fought back, and now they're basically no more.

"If we don't come up with a way to seriously turn this tide and stop the Epics, then humankind is finished. We can't keep killing them, Mizzy. It's too slow, and we're too fragile. We *have* to be able to start *turning* them.

"We're rescuing Prof not just for the man himself. Sparks, when we succeed, he'll probably hate us for it, since he'll have to live with what he did. He'd probably rather be dead. But we'll do it anyway, because we need his help. And we need to *prove* that it can be done."

Mizzy nodded slowly as Abraham got into the car. I put the gun down.

"Guess I'll have to sit on this thirst for vengeance," Mizzy said. "Smother it real good."

"No," I said.

She turned and looked at me.

"Keep that fire alive, Mizzy," I said, then I pointed out the rooftop. "But aim it at the real target. The one who *actually* killed your friends."

Calamity hung outside, a bright red dot in the sky, like the targeting point on a scope's overlay. Visible every night.

Mizzy nodded.

Abraham started the car, not asking to be caught up on our conversation. As we moved, my phone blinked and I sat back, anticipating another round of banter with Megan.

Instead, her text was brief, yet chilling.

Hurry up. We decided to scout close to the city, to get a glimpse.

Something's happened.

What? I messaged back, urgent.

Kansas City. It's gone.

12

I tried to think of a proper metaphor for the way the slag *crunched* under my feet. Like…like ice on…No.

I stepped across the wide-open landscape of melted rock that had been Kansas City. For once, words failed me. The only proper descriptor I could think of was…sorrowful.

The day before, this had been one of the points of civilization on an otherwise dark map. Yes, it had been a place dominated by Epics, but it had also been a place of life, culture, society. *People.* Tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of them.

All gone.

I crouched down, rubbing my fingers on the smooth ground. It was still warm, and probably would be for days. The blast had warped stone and, in an instant, turned buildings into molten mountains of steel. The ground was covered in little ridges of glass, like frozen waves, none taller than an inch. Somehow they conveyed the feeling of an incredible wind blowing from the center point of the destruction.

All those people. Gone. I sent a prayer to God, or whoever might be listening, that some of them had gotten out before the blast. Footsteps announced Megan. She was lit by the morning sun.

"We're dying out, Megan," I said, voice ragged. "We capitulated to the Epics, and we're still getting exterminated. Their wars will end all life on this planet."

She rested a hand on my shoulder as I crouched there, feeling the glass that had once been people.

"This was Obliteration?" she asked.

"This matches what he did in other cities," I said. "And I know of no other with the powers to do this."

"That maniac…"

"There's something seriously wrong with that man, Megan. When he destroys a city, he considers it a *mercy.* He seems to think…seems to think that the way to truly rid the world of Epics is to destroy every single person who could ever become one."

The darkness had given Obliteration a special kind of madness, a twisted version of the Reckoners' own goal. Rid the world of Epics.

No matter what the cost.

My mobile blinked, and I ripped it off the place where it usually rested, strapped to my jacket's shoulder.

You see this? It was Knighthawk, and he'd included an attachment. I opened it up. It was a shot of a large explosion blasting out from what I presumed to be Kansas City. The photo had been taken from far away.

People are sharing this right and left, Knighthawk sent. *Aren't you guys heading that direction?*

You know exactly where we are, I texted back. *You're tracking my mobile.*

I was just being polite, he sent. *Get me some photos of the center of the city. Obliteration is going to be a problem.*

Going to be? I sent.

Yeah, well, look at this.

The next shot was an image of a lanky man with a goatee walking through a crowded street, long trench coat fluttering behind him, sword strapped to his side. I recognized Obliteration immediately.

Kansas City? I asked. *Before the blast.*

Yeah, Knighthawk wrote back.

The ramifications of that sank in. I scrambled to dial Knighthawk's number, then lifted the phone to my ear. He picked up a second later.

"He isn't glowing," I said, eager. "That means—"

"What are you doing?" Knighthawk demanded. "Idiot!"

He hung up.

I stared at the phone, confused, until another message came. *Did I say you could call me, boy?*

But…, I wrote back. *You've been texting me all day.*

Totally different, he wrote. *Didgeridooing invasion of privacy, calling a person without their permission.*

"Didgeridooing?" Megan asked from over my shoulder.

"Profanity filter on my mobile," I said.

"You use a *profanity* filter? What is this, kindergarten?"

"Nah," I said. "It's hilarious. Makes people sound *really* stupid."

Another text came from Knighthawk. *You said that Regalia created a motivator from Obliteration. What do you want to bet she made more than one? Look at these images.*

He sent another sequence that showed Obliteration in Kansas City, working on some kind of glowing object. It was bright, but you could still tell it was doing the glowing, not Obliteration himself.

Timestamp on that last one is right before the place got vaporized, Knighthawk sent. *He destroyed Kansas City with a device. But why use one of those instead of doing it himself?*

Stealthier, I wrote back. *Him sitting in the center of town like he did in Texas, glowing until he blows the place up, is going to give a big warning that people should run.*

That's downright disgusting, Knighthawk wrote.

Can you watch for him on other mobiles?

That's a lot of data to sift, kid, Knighthawk sent.

You have something better to do?

Yeah, maybe. I'm not one of your Reckoners.

*Yes, but you *are* a human being. Please. Do what you can. If you spot him in another city, glowing or not, send me word. We can maybe warn the people.*

We'll see, he sent.

Megan regarded my phone. "I should be creeped out by how much control he has over the mobiles, shouldn't I?"

She and I took some more pictures of the downtown. After we sent them to Knighthawk, my entire conversation with him faded from my mobile. I showed Megan, though she was distracted, looking across the seemingly endless field of glassy rock-and-steel mounds that had once been a city.

"It would have killed me," she said softly. "Fire. A permanent end."

"It would have killed most Epics," I said. "Even some other High

Epics." It was one way to get past their invulnerabilities—nuke them to oblivion. A terrible solution, as some countries had discovered. You could nuke only so many of your own cities before you didn't have anything left to protect.

Megan leaned on me as I put my hand on her shoulder. She'd climbed into a burning building to save my life, confronting what could have killed her, but that didn't mean her fear was gone. It was merely controlled. Managed.

Together, the two of us joined the other Reckoners, who had settled near the center of the blast—which Abraham had tested for radiation, to be sure it was safe.

"We're going to have to do something about this one, David," Abraham said as I walked up.

"Agreed," I said. "Saving Prof comes first though. Are we agreed on that?"

Around the group, they nodded. Abraham and Cody had been with Megan and me from the start, willing to try bringing back Prof instead of killing him. It seemed I'd persuaded Mizzy with our conversation in the car, as she nodded vigorously.

"Is anyone else here worried about *why* Prof went to Atlanta?" Cody asked. "I mean, he could've stayed in Babilar and had all sorts of Epics obeying him. Instead, he's moved all the way out here."

"He must have a plan," I said.

"He has all of Regalia's information," Abraham said. "She knew things about Epics, their powers, and Calamity—more, I suspect, than anyone else knows. Makes me wonder what he discovered in her data."

I nodded, thoughtful. "Regalia said that she wanted a successor. We know she was involved in things much larger than that one city. She'd been in *communication* with Calamity, had been trying to figure out how his powers worked. Maybe Prof's continuing her work, whatever she was plotting before the cancer grew too bad."

"Possible," Mizzy said. "But what? What was she planning—or alternately, what is *Prof* planning?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I'm worried. Prof is one of the most effective, intelligent people I've ever met. He's obviously not going to sit around as an Epic and merely rule a city. He'll have grander plans; whatever

he's up to, it will be *big*."

We left Kansas City a far more solemn group than had entered. We traveled closer together this time, two jeeps driving single file. It took a sickeningly long time to reach a point where we weren't surrounded by melted buildings and scarred ground. We kept going, though the sun had risen. Abraham figured we were close to our target, within a few hours at most.

I decided the best way to distract myself from the horror of Kansas City was to try to get something productive done. So I took out one of the boxes Knighthawk had given us. Mizzy twisted around in her seat, looking back over the headrest curiously. Abraham glanced at me in the rearview mirror but said nothing, and I couldn't read his emotions. I'd known piles of ammunition more expressive than Abraham. The guy could be like some kind of Zen monk sometimes. With a minigun.

I lifted the lid, turning the box so Mizzy could see inside. It contained a pair of gloves and a jar filled with a silver liquid.

"Mercury?" Mizzy asked.

"Yeah," I said, taking out a glove and turning it over.

"Isn't that stuff, like, *reaaaal* bad for you?"

"Not sure," I admitted.

"It causes madness," Abraham said. Then, after a moment, "So no big change for anyone in this particular car."

"Hur hur," Mizzy said.

"Mercury is quite toxic," Abraham said. "Quickly absorbed into the skin, and can even emit vapors that are dangerous. Be careful with it, David."

"I'll leave the lid on until I know what I'm doing. I'll just see if I can get the mercury to move around in the jar."

I pulled on the glove, eager. Immediately, lines of violet light ran down the fingers to a central pool in the palm. The softly glowing purple reminded me of the tensors, which I supposed made sense. Prof had created those to imitate Epic-derived technology. He'd probably used one of Knighthawk's designs.

"This is going to be breathtaking," I said, imagining the things I'd read about Rtich's powers. I held my hand over the jar of mercury, but then paused. How exactly did I engage the abilities? The spyril had been tough to control, though easy to engage in the first place. But with the tensors, it had taken time before I'd managed to make them do anything.

I tried giving mental commands, tried using the tricks I'd used to make the tensors work, yet nothing happened.

"Is it gonna take my breath *now,*" Mizzy asked, "or, like, sometime down the road? I'd like to be prepared."

"I have no idea how to make these work," I said, waving my hand and trying again.

"Are there instructions, perhaps?" Abraham asked.

"What kind of super-amazing Epic technology comes with an *instruction* book?" I said. That seemed too mundane. Still, I looked through the box. Nothing.

"It is for the best," Abraham said. "We should wait to try this in a more controlled environment—or at least until we aren't driving on a half-broken road."

With a sigh, I took off the glove, then picked up the large jar of mercury and stared at it. The stuff was *weird.* I'd imagined what a liquid metal would be like, but it defied those expectations. It flowed quickly, lightly, and was incredibly reflective. Like someone had melted a mirror.

I packed the jar away at another prompting from Abraham and set the box at my feet, though I did send a text to Knighthawk asking for instructions. Not long after, however, Megan's car slowed ahead of us. Abraham's mobile buzzed.

"Yeah?" he said, tapping it and pressing his earpiece in tighter. "Huh. Curious. We're stopping now." He slowed the jeep, then glanced back at me. "Cody has spotted something ahead."

"The city?" I asked.

"Close. Its trail. Look at two o'clock."

I got out my gun and—unzipping the top of the jeep—stood up. From that vantage, I could see something very interesting off the roadway: a huge plain of flattened, dead weeds. It extended into the distance.

"The city definitely came this way," Abraham said from below. "You can't tell from here, but that's part of a very wide strip—as wide as a city—of dead grass. Ildithia leaves that behind as it travels, like a giant slug's trail."

"Great," I said, yawning. "Let's chase it down."

"Agreed," Abraham said, "but look closer. Cody says he spotted people walking the trail."

I looked again, and indeed several small groups of people trudged along the wide strip of ground. “Huh,” I said. “They’re headed away from the city. We think it’s moving northward, right?”

“Yes,” Abraham said. “This confused Cody and Megan as well. Do you want to investigate?”

“Yes,” I said, settling back into the jeep. “I’ll send the other two.”

We turned off the road and moved toward the strip of dead grass as I texted Megan. *See what you two can find out from those stragglers, but don’t take any risks.*

They’re refugees, she sent. *What kind of risks could be involved? Scurvy?*

—

Cody and Megan went on ahead, and we hung back. I tried to catch a nap, but the jeep’s seat was too uncomfortable and—even though there really was no reason to worry—I was worried for Megan.

Eventually, her text came. *They *are* refugees. They know about Prof, though they call him Limelight. He’s been here for two or three weeks, and some of the other Epics are resisting him, the main one in charge—a guy named Larcener—included.*

The people have fled the city because they think a confrontation between Prof and Larcener is coming, and they figure they’ll get away for a week or two—live off the land—before going back and seeing who’s ended up in control.

Did they say how far away the city is? I asked.

They’ve been walking for hours, she sent, *so…maybe an hour or two by jeep? They say we’ll pass other refugees moving toward Ildithia. People from Kansas City.*

So at least some of the inhabitants escaped. I was relieved to hear that.

I showed the texts to Mizzy and Abraham.

“This note about Ildithian politics is good,” Abraham said. “It means that Prof has not stabilized power in the city. He will not have the resources to watch for us.”

“Will we be able to get in?” Mizzy asked. “Without looking suspicious?”

“We can hide among the refugees from Kansas City,” I said.

“We wouldn’t even need that,” Abraham said. “Larcener allows people to enter or leave Ildithia without penalty, so there is often a trickle going in and out. We can present ourselves as hopeful workers, and they should take us right in.”

I nodded slowly, then delivered the order to continue off-road, but to give the swath of dead land a wide berth. Working cars—which had to be converted to run off power cells—were a novelty in most parts of the world. Who knew what sort of stupid bravery we could run into if we came too close to people desperate enough?

Megan and Cody rejoined us, and together we traveled across the bumpy ground for about an hour. Watching through my scope, I spotted the first signs of Ildithia: fields. They grew alongside the city, not in the patch of dead ground, but right next to it. I’d expected this; Atlanta was known for its produce.

Shortly after spotting this, I noticed something else peeking over the horizon ahead of us: a skyline incongruously rising from the center of a large, otherwise featureless landscape.

We’d found Atlanta, or Ildithia, its modern name.

The city of salt.

13

I sat on the hood of our jeep, which we'd parked in a little stand of trees a mile or two from Ildithia, and studied the city with my scope. Ildithia was made up of a good chunk of old Atlanta—downtown, midtown, some of the surrounding suburbs. About seven miles across, according to Abraham.

Its skyscrapers reminded me of Newcago—though admittedly, living inside the city hadn't given me a good sense for what its skyline looked like. These buildings seemed more spaced out, and pointier. Also, they were made of salt.

When I'd heard about a city made of salt, I'd imagined a place made of translucent crystal. Boy, had I been wrong. The buildings were mostly opaque, translucent only at the corners where the sun shone through. They resembled stone, not giant growths of the ground-up stuff for eating.

The skyscrapers represented a marvelous variety of colors. Pinks and greys dominated, and my scope's magnification let me pick out veins of white, black, and even green running through the walls. Honestly, it was beautiful.

It was also changing. We had approached from the back—this city definitely had a "back" and a "front." The districts at its rear were slowly *crumbling away,* like a dirt wall in the rain. Melting, sloughing off. As I watched, the entire side of a skyscraper crumbled; then the whole thing came tumbling down with a crash I could hear even at this distance.

The salt piled in lumps as it fell, getting smaller the farther along the trail they were. That made sense; most Epic powers didn't create objects permanently. The fallen salt buildings would eventually melt and vanish,

evaporating and leaving the dead, flattened ground we'd traveled along.

As I understood it, on the other side of the city new buildings would be growing—like crystals forming, Abraham had explained. Ildithia moved, but not on legs or wheels. It moved like mold creeping across a piece of discarded toast.

"Wow," I said, lowering my rifle. "It's incredible."

"Yes," Abraham said from beside the jeep. "And a pain to live in. The whole city cycles through every week, you see. The buildings that decay back here regrow on the front side."

"Which is cool."

"It is a pain," Abraham repeated. "Imagine if your home crumbled every seven days, and you had to move across the city into a new one. Still, the local Epics are no more cruel than anywhere else, and the city has some conveniences."

"Water?" I asked. "Electricity?"

"Their water supply is collected from rain, which falls often, because of a local Epic."

"Stormwind," I said, nodding. "And that—"

"Doesn't melt the salt?" Abraham interjected before I could ask. "Yes, but it does not matter much. The buildings on the back side do get weathered by the time they fall, and perhaps they leak, but it is manageable. The bigger problem is finding ways to collect water that isn't too salty to drink."

"No plumbing then," I said. The Reckoner hideout in Babilar had had a septic tank, which was a nice luxury.

"The rich have electricity," Abraham said. "The city trades food for power cells."

Megan strolled up, one hand shading her eyes as she looked at the city. "You sure this plan of yours will get us in, Abraham?"

"Oh, certainly," Abraham said. "Getting into Ildithia is never a problem."

We piled into the jeeps again, then did a careful loop around the city, keeping our distance just in case. We finally ditched our jeeps in an old farmhouse, fully aware that they might not be there when we returned, fancy Reckoner locks or not. We also swapped our clothing for battered jeans, dusty coats, and backpacks with old water bottles at the sides. When we set out, we hopefully looked like a group of loners working to survive on their own.

The following hike left me missing the bumpy ride of the jeep. As we drew close to the leading edge of Ildithia, we walked among more of those fields—things I'd read about, heard about, but never seen before today.

There was more connectivity between city-states in the Fractured States than I'd once assumed. Perhaps the Epics could have survived without any kind of infrastructure, but they tended to want subjects to rule. What good was it to be an all-powerful force of destruction and fury if you didn't have peasants to murder now and then? Unfortunately peasants had to eat, or they'd go and die before you got a chance to murder them.

That meant building up some kind of structure in your city, finding some kind of product you could trade. Cities that could produce a surplus of food could trade for power cells, weapons, or luxuries. I found that satisfying. When they'd first appeared, the Epics had wantonly destroyed anything and everything, ruining the national infrastructure. Now they were forced to bring it all back, becoming administrators.

Life was so unfair. You couldn't *both* destroy everything around you *and* live like a king.

Hence the fields. The ones I'd noticed alongside the city's path had already been harvested, but these cornfields were ripe and ready. People worked them in large numbers, and though it was early spring, they were already harvesting.

"Stormwind again?" I whispered to Abraham, who hiked beside me.

"Yes," he said. "Her rains cause hyperquick growth around the city; they can get a new crop every ten days. Periodically, the people travel with her a few days in advance of the city's path and plant, then she waters. Workers travel ahead and manage the fields, then rejoin the city when it passes them. Oh, and you might want to keep your head down."

I lowered my eyes, adopting the old familiar posture—with flat expression—of one who lived under Epic rule. Abraham had to nudge Megan as she defiantly met the eyes of a guard we passed, a woman with a rifle on her shoulder and a sneer on her lips.

"Move on to the city," the woman said, pointing her gun toward Ildithia. "You touch an ear of corn without permission and we'll shoot you. You want food, talk to the overseers."

As we drew closer to the city, we picked up an escort of men with cudgels on their belts. I felt uncomfortable beneath their gaze but kept my eyes down, which let me inspect the transition into the city. First there was a

little crust on the ground. It got thicker as we drew closer, crunching underfoot and breaking, until finally we stepped onto true saltstone.

Closer in, we passed lumps that indicated where buildings were starting to grow. The white-grey of the salt here was woven with dozens of different strata, ribbons of color, like frozen smoke. The stone had a texture to it I could see, and it made me want to rub my fingers on the rock and feel it.

The place smelled strange. Salty, I guess. And dry. The fields had been humid, so it was noticeable how dry the air was here right inside the city. We joined a short line of people waiting to enter the city proper, where the buildings were the correct size.

There was also a familiarity to the sight: the uniform texture and tone, even with the variations in color, reminded me of the steel of Newcago. This place was probably alien to everyone else, with everything grown out of solid salt, but to me that was normal. It felt like coming home. Another irony. To me, comfort was intrinsically tied to something the Epics had created.

We were given an orientation; the person who spoke to us was surprised that we weren't refugees from Kansas City, but he kept his speech quick and direct. The food belonged to Larcener. If you wanted some, you worked for it. The city wasn't policed, so he said we'd probably want to join one of the established communities, if we could find one that was taking new members. Epics could do what they wanted, so stay out of their way.

It seemed to lack Newcago's structure. There, Steelheart had established a defined upper crust of non-Epics, and had used a powerful police force to keep people in line. In turn though, in Newcago we'd had access to electricity, mobiles, even movies.

That bothered me. I didn't want to discover that Steelheart had been a more effective leader than others, though part of me had known it for a long time. Heck, Megan had told me as much when I'd first joined the team.

Orientation done, we subjected ourselves to being searched—Abraham had warned us of this, so Megan was prepared to use her powers in a very careful illusion on several bags. That disguised some tools, like our power cells and advanced weapons, as more mundane items. She left a nice handgun as a plant, undisguised, for the guards to "confiscate" for themselves, a kind of toll for getting into the city. They let us have our more mundane weapons though, as Abraham had said they would. Weapons weren't illegal in the city.

After the search wrapped up, we were cleared. The guy from before,

who'd given us our orientation, pointed. "You can take any building that's not occupied. But if I were you, I'd keep my head down these next few weeks."

"Why?" I asked, slinging my pack over my shoulder.

He eyed me. "Trouble between Epics. Nothing we can bother ourselves with, other than to lie low. Might be less food to be had in coming days." He shook his head, then pointed toward a stack of crates sitting outside the border. "I tell you what," he said to us and a few other newcomers. "I lost my work crew this morning. Sparking morons ran off. You help me cart those crates in, and I'll give you a full day's grain requisition, as if you'd started in the morning."

I looked to the others, who shrugged. If we'd actually been the loners we pretended to be, there was little chance we'd have passed up such an opportunity. Within minutes, we were hauling crates. The wooden containers were stamped with the burned-in mark of UTC, a group of nomadic traders ruled by Terms, an Epic with time manipulation powers. Looked like I'd missed her visit, unfortunately. I'd always wanted to see her in person.

The work was hard, but it did give me a chance to see some of the city. Ildithia was well populated; even with a large number of people manning the fields, the streets were busy. No cars, except the ones on the sides of the road that were made of salt, leftovers from when the city had originally been transformed. Apparently when the city regrew each week, it also reproduced things like these cars. None of them worked of course. Instead, there were a striking number of bicyclists.

Laundry was draped on lines outside windows. Children played with plastic cars alongside one road, their knees covered in salt that had rubbed off the ground. People carried goods purchased from a market that, after a few trips, I managed to pinpoint on a street one over from our path—which ran between the outer edge of the city and a warehouse about a half hour inside.

As I traipsed back and forth with box after box, I was able to get a good feel for how the buildings grew. Right inside the border, bulges formed into the knobs of weathered-looking foundations, like stones that had stood for centuries in the wind. Beyond those, the buildings had begun to fully take shape, walls stretching upward, brickwork emerging. It was like erosion in reverse.

The process wasn't perfect. Occasionally we would pass unformed lumps on the ground or between buildings, like cancerous growths of salt. I asked one of the other people lugging boxes about it, and he shrugged and

told me that each week there were some irregularities. They'd be gone the next time the city cycled through, but others would have grown.

I found it all fascinating. I lingered for a long moment before what seemed like it would become a row of apartments formed out of a black-blue salt with a swirling pattern. I could almost see the buildings rising, ever so slowly, like…popsicles getting un-licked.

There were trees too—that was a difference from Newcago, where nothing organic had transformed. These grew up like the buildings, crafted delicately from salt. They were only stumps here, but farther in they were full-blown trees.

"Don't stare too long, newbie," a woman said, hiking past and dusting off her gloved hands. "That's Inkom territory." She was one of the workers from the field, recruited to haul with us.

"Inkom?" I asked, catching up and nodding to Abraham as he passed, carting another box.

"That neighborhood," the tall woman said. "Closed doors—they don't take new members. They're up for degrade on the trailing edge, and usually move into that apartment set until their homes reconstitute. After Inkom moves out, Barchin tends to move in, and you don't want to try to deal with them. Nasty bunch. They'll let anyone join, but they'll take half your rations, and only to let you sleep in a gutter between two buildings until you've been with them for a year."

"Thanks for the tip," I said, looking over my shoulder at the lumpish buildings. "But this place is big—looks like there's lots of empty space. Why would we want to join a family anyway?"

"Protection," the woman said. "Sure, you can set up in an empty home—there are lots of those—but without a good family at your back, you're likely to get robbed blind, or worse."

"Rough," I said, shivering. "Anything else I should know? Isn't there a new Epic to worry about?"

"Limelight?" she said. "Yeah, I'd stay out of his way. Any Epic's way, even more than usual. Limelight is mostly in charge now, but there are a few holdouts. Stormwind. Larcener. War is brewing. Either way, Epics like the skyrises, so stay away from downtown. Right now, the downtown is about five."

"…Five?"

“Five days since it grew,” she said. “Two more days until the skyscrapers degrade. Usually the roughest time of the week is when that happens. When the taller buildings downtown start to go, the Epics get annoyed and go looking for entertainment. Some move to midtown. Others prowl about. A day or so after, their suites will have regrown and their servants will have moved everything, and it’s generally safe to emerge. Don’t know how the power struggle is going to change all this though.”

We reached the stack of crates at the edge of the city, and I grabbed one off the pile. I still carried my pack on my back—I wasn’t going to separate from it, even if it increased my load each trip. Were there other questions I could ask this woman?

“You and your friends are good workers,” the woman noted, getting a crate of her own. “We might be able to give you a place in my neighborhood. Can’t speak for certain, that’s Doug’s call. But we’re fair, only take a quarter of your rations—use it to feed the elderly and the sick.”

“That sounds tempting,” I said, though it wasn’t at all. We would be making our own safehouse somewhere in the city. “How do I go about applying?”

“You don’t,” she said. “Just show up at this edge in the morning and do some hard work. We’ll be watching. Don’t come looking for us, or things will go poorly for you.”

She hefted her box and strode off. I adjusted my own box, watching her, noting the outline of what was most likely a handgun hidden in the crook of her back, beneath her jacket.

“Tough city,” Mizzy mumbled, grabbing a box and passing me.

“Yeah,” I said. But then again it wasn’t.

I lifted my box to my shoulder and hiked off down the road. I had been young when this had all started, only eight, an orphan on the streets. I’d lived a year on my own before I’d been taken in. I remembered hushed conversations among adults about the breakdown of society projecting horrible things like cannibalism and gangs burning whatever they could find, families breaking apart—every man living for himself.

That hadn’t transpired. People are people. Whatever happens, they make communities, struggle for normalcy. Even with the Epics, most of us simply wanted to live our lives. The woman’s words had been harsh, but also hopeful. If you worked hard, you could find a place in this world despite the insanity. It was encouraging.

I smiled. Right about then, I realized that the street was empty. I stopped, frowning. The kids were gone. No bicycles on the road. Curtains drawn. I turned to catch a few other workers ducking for buildings nearby. The woman I'd talked to passed me in a rush, her crate dropped somewhere.

"Epic," she hissed. She rushed to an open doorway in what had once been a storefront, following a couple other people inside.

I dumped my crate in a hurry and followed, pushing through the cloth draping the doorway and joining her and a family huddled in the dim light. One man who'd entered before us took out a handgun and looked over the two of us warily, but didn't point the weapon at us. The implication seemed clear: we could stay until the Epic passed.

The draping in the doorway flapped softly. They probably had as much trouble with doors here as we did in Newcago. I'm sure a door made of salt was hard to use, so they knocked it off and used this cloth as a replacement. Not terribly secure—but then, that was why you had guns.

The front window of the store was made of thinner salt, almost like a glass window, though too cloudy to make out details through. It gave the room some light, and I could see a shadow pass on the other side. A single figure, trailed by something glowing, in the shape of a sphere.

Green light. Of a shade I recognized.

Oh no, I thought.

I had to look. I couldn't help it. The others hissed at me as I moved to the doorway and peeked past the rippling cloth at the street outside.

It was Prof.

14

I used to think that I could pick out Epics by sight. The fact that I spent weeks in the Reckoners alongside not one but *two* hidden Epics proved me wrong on that count.

That said, there *is* a look about an Epic who is in the throes of their power. The way they stand so tall, the way they smile with such confidence. They stand out, like a burp during a prayer.

Prof appeared much as he had when I'd last seen him, clad in a black lab coat, hands glowing faintly green. He had a head of greying hair that one wouldn't expect to be paired with such a powerful physique. Prof was sturdy. Like a stone wall, or a bulldozer. You'd never call this man elegant, but you would absolutely not want to try to cut in front of him in line.

He strode down the white and grey street, a spherical forcefield trailing him with a person trapped inside. Long, dark hair obscured her face, but she wore a traditional Chinese dress. It was Stormwind, the Epic who brought the rains and caused crops to grow at hyperaccelerated rates. The woman I'd talked to earlier said she'd been holding out against Prof's rule.

Looked like that had changed. Prof stopped outside the shop I was in, then turned, looking toward the windows of the buildings along the street. I ducked back inside, heart thumping. He seemed to be searching for something.

Sparks! What to do? Run? My rifle was in my pack, disassembled, but I had a handgun stuffed into my belt, under my shirt. The guards outside had let that pass as Abraham had said they would. They apparently didn't care if people inside were armed. They seemed to expect it.

Well, guns wouldn't do much against Prof. He was a High Epic with *two* prime invincibilities. Not only would his forcefields protect him from damage, but if he did get hurt, he would heal.

I slipped the handgun from my belt anyway. The other people in the room huddled together, staying quiet. If there was another way out, they'd probably have taken it—though that wasn't a hundred percent given. Many people hid from Epics instead of running. They figured the only way to cope was to hunker down and wait it out.

I peeked through the doorway again, my heart thundering. Prof hadn't moved, but he had turned from our building, inspecting one across the street instead. I hurriedly wiped the sweat from my forehead before it could trickle into my eyes, then pulled my earpiece out of my pocket and fitted it in.

"Has anyone seen David?" Cody was saying.

"I passed him on the last round," Abraham said. "He should be near the warehouse, I think. Far away from Prof."

"Yeah, about that," I whispered.

"David!" Megan's voice. "Where are you? Get under cover. Prof is moving down the street."

"I can see that," I said. "He seems to be looking for something. What are everyone's positions?"

"I've got a spot with a good view," Cody said, "'bout fifty yards from the target, second story of a building with an open window. Have my sights on him now."

"Megan grabbed me," Abraham said, "and towed me around a corner. We're a street over to the east, watching Cody's feed on our mobiles."

"Hold your positions," I whispered. "Mizzy?"

"Haven't heard from her," Abraham answered.

"I'm here," Mizzy said, sounding breathless. "Maaan, I just about *stepped on him,* guys."

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Ran away, perpendicular to our street. I'm at a market or something. Everyone's hiding, but it's packed here."

"Stay in position," I whispered, "and tap into Cody's feed. This might not be related to us. He's obviously making a show of having captured Stormwind, and…*Sparks.*"

"What?" Mizzy asked.

Prof was glowing. The pale green light spread from him as he turned in place on the street. “Are you going to come out?” he bellowed. “I know you are here! Show yourselves!”

I hated hearing Prof’s voice sound so…like an Epic. He’d always been gruff, but this was different. Imperious, demanding, *angry*. I held the handgun in a sweaty grip. Behind me, one of the children whimpered.

“I’m going to lead him away,” I whispered.

“What!” Megan demanded.

“There isn’t time,” I said, standing up. “If he starts ripping apart the area looking for me, he’ll kill people. I’ve got to draw his attention.”

“David, no,” Megan said. “I’m coming your way. Just—”

Prof thrust his arms forward, toward the building in front of him—not mine, but an apartment complex across the street. It was some eight stories high, constructed entirely of pink and grey salt.

And at Prof’s gesture, it vaporized.

In Newcago, I’d seen him do incredible things with his powers. He’d faced down an Enforcement squad, destroying their weapons, bullets, and armor as he fought. But that had been *nothing* compared to this. He disintegrated an entire building into dust in an eyeblink.

Prof’s powers destroyed not only the salt structure, but the furniture inside it as well, leaving people and personal effects to plummet. The people hit the ground with awful thuds and cries of pain. Except for one, who remained flying in the air about twenty feet up. He leveled a pair of uzis at Prof and fired.

The bullets had no effect, of course. In an instant, the hovering man was surrounded by a glowing green sphere. He dropped his guns, feeling at the walls of his new prison in a panic.

Prof made a fist. The sphere shrank to the size of a basketball, crushing the Epic inside into pulp.

I looked away, suddenly sick. That…that was what he had done to Exel and Val.

“False alarm,” Cody said over the line, sounding relieved. “He’s not looking for us. He’s hunting Epics who still follow Larcener.”

Prof released the sphere and dropped the remnants of the dead Epic to the ground with a nauseating splat. From a shop next to mine, someone else stepped out onto the street, a young man—still a teenager—in a loose necktie and a hat. He stood facing Prof for a moment, then dropped to one knee,

bowing.

A sphere of light appeared around him. The young man looked up in a panic. Prof held out a single palm, as if weighing the newcomer. Then he swiped his hand to the side, and the sphere vanished.

"Remember that feeling, little Epic," Prof said. "You are the one they call Dynamo, I believe. I accept your allegiance, tardy though it is. Where is your master?"

He gulped, then spoke. "My former master?" the youth asked, his voice breaking. "He is a coward, lord. He runs from you."

"He was with you earlier today," Prof said. "Where did he go?"

The youth pointed along a street, hand shaking. "He has a safehouse one street over. He forbade us to join him. I can show you."

Prof gestured, and the youth ran past him on wobbly legs. Prof clasped his hands behind his back and started to follow at a stroll, but paused.

My breath caught in my throat. What was wrong?

Prof took a few steps in my direction, then knelt, looking at the crate I'd dropped earlier. It had cracked open at the side. He nudged it with his foot and seemed contemplative.

"Lord?" the youth asked.

Prof turned away from the crate and swept after the youth, his lab coat rippling at the motion. The forcefield carrying Stormwind followed like an obedient puppy. The woman inside didn't look up.

I relaxed, slumping against the wall, and lowered my gun. "Mizzy," I whispered over the line, "he's coming your direction."

"Sounds like he's searching for Larcener," Megan said over the line. "We've managed to stroll right into his final throw-down with the city's former leader. How delightful for us."

"I'm following him with my scope," Cody said. "But I won't be able to see much as he moves to the next street. You want me to maintain surveillance, lad, or stand down?"

"Being this close to him is dangerous," Abraham said. "If he so much as glimpses one of us…"

"Yeah," Cody said, "but I sure would like to know what he's capable of before we try to bring 'im down. That thing he did with the building…that makes the tensors look like a child's toy by comparison."

“Nice metaphor,” I said absently. “We need to know the results of his face-off with Larcener, if it happens. Cody, see if you can get in position. Mizzy, I *do* want you out of there.”

“Trying,” she said, grunting. “I’m pressed into a room with a lot of people, and…Blah. I don’t know how quickly I can get out, guys….”

Well, we weren’t going to fall back while one of our own was in danger. “Megan, be ready for a distraction. Abraham, stay with Megan.” I took a deep breath. “I’m going to tail Prof.”

Nobody objected. They trusted me. I shouldered my pack—there was no time to assemble my Gottschalk—and stood up beside the doorway, peeking through the fluttering cloth draping. Before ducking out, I glanced at the room’s other occupants.

All of them—the man with his children, the woman who had talked to me earlier—were staring at me with dumbfounded expressions.

“Did you say you’re going *after* that Epic?” the man demanded. “Are you insane?”

“No,” the woman said softly. “You’re one of them, aren’t you? The ones who fight. I heard you were all killed in New York.”

“Don’t tell anyone you saw me, please,” I said. I saluted them with a lift of my gun, then slipped out onto the empty street.

I stopped to nudge the box that Prof had paused beside—the crate I’d dropped. It was filled with foodstuffs, the packaged kind you had to trade to get, that came from cities that still had factories: beans, canned chicken, soda. I nodded, then hurried in the direction Prof had gone.

15

"ALL right," I said, pulling up beside the wall of an alleyway, my pistol in a two-handed grip before me. "Let's play this very, *very* carefully. Our primary objective is to make sure Mizzy extracts safely. Information gathering comes second."

A sequence of "rogers" came over the line. I tapped my mobile's screen into Cody's feed. Our earpieces, which had a part that curled over the ear and pointed forward, could give any of us a view of what another one of us was doing.

He was moving down a dark hallway. Diaphanous light seeped through the wall to his right, like a flashlight shining inside someone's mouth. He reached a room that still had a salt door—I was surprised when he shoved it that it moved. He slipped inside and crept up to a window. He broke the salt there—which proved more difficult than I'd have guessed—with the butt of his rifle, then poked the gun out. When he patched through the feed from his scope instead of his earpiece, it gave us a vantage from several stories up.

The market was easy to spot—it was an old parking garage, the sides draped with colorful cloths and awnings that spread out onto the streets around it.

"Yeah," Mizzy said as Cody focused on it, "I'm in there. Got pushed down onto one of the lower levels by the crowd. I'm trying a stairwell now. Still a lot of people hiding in here."

Prof was heading right for the market, the green glow of his forcefields lighting up the street. I followed a parallel path down a smaller side street, eventually taking cover beside some bushes made of pink salt.

In fact, this bush was still growing. I stared, momentarily transfixed by the little salt leaves sprouting out of tiny branches like crystals. I'd assumed that things grew up on the leading edge of the city, stopping once they matched the way Atlanta had once been, then remained static. It seemed that parts of the inner city were still developing.

"David?" a voice whispered. I turned to see Megan and Abraham scrambling up to me.

Right, right. Friend and mentor on a murderous rampage. I should probably remain focused.

"Megan," I said, "a little more cover might be nice."

She nodded, and concentrated for a moment. In an eyeblink, the bushes in front of us became far more dense. It was an illusion, a shadow pulled from another world where those shrubs *were* more dense, but it was perfect.

"Thanks," I said, taking off my pack and quickly assembling my rifle.

Prof strode out onto the street a short distance from us. The teenage Epic I'd seen earlier led him, gesturing as they walked. Stormwind's bubble had been parked at the mouth of an alleyway and left there, hovering.

The younger Epic with Prof…Dynamo? I wasn't sure what his powers were. In a city like this there would be dozens of lesser Epics, and I didn't have them all memorized.

Dynamo pointed toward the ground, then toward the market. Prof nodded, but I was too far away to hear what they said.

"An underground room," Abraham whispered. "That has to be the safehouse—an office linked to the parking garage, perhaps?"

"Can there *be* basements in this city?" I asked.

"Shallow ones," Abraham said, tapping the ground with his foot. "Depending on the area, Ildithia can grow up on a mass of salt rock that's several stories high in some places; it replicates the landscape of the original Atlanta, filling in holes and creating hills. It's as shallow as a few feet elsewhere, but this is a thick portion. Did you notice the slope while we walked to the warehouse?"

I hadn't. "Mizzy," I said, "he might be coming in there. Status?"

"Trapped," she whispered. "Stairwell is packed; everyone and their dog thought to hide in here. Like, seriously. There are *four* dogs. I can't find a way out."

Prof didn't follow the young Epic toward the parking garage. He strode farther down the street and swept both hands before himself.

The street melted away. The salt became powder, and that blew off in a gust of air that Prof created by quickly pushing two concave forcefields. The rest drained away into a hollow space below, leaving behind a set of stairs that Prof walked down without breaking stride.

It was amazing. I'd studied Epics, come up with my own systems of categorization. I admit I was a little obsessed. In the same way that a million preschoolers asking questions over and over at the same time might be a little obnoxious.

Prof's power was unique—he didn't just destroy matter, he sculpted it. It was beautiful destruction, and I found that I envied him. Once, I'd held that power, gifted to me. After Steelheart's death, Prof had stopped doing that so much. I'd had the spyril to keep me entertained, but I could see that even then he'd been withdrawing from us.

It was the time he saved me from Enforcement, I realized. *That was the beginning of the problems.*

I'd started him down this path. I knew I couldn't take all the blame—Regalia's plot to turn Prof would probably have happened whether or not I had joined the Reckoners—but neither could I deny responsibility.

"Mizzy," I said over the line, "hold tight. You might be safest in there after all."

Prof stepped down into the chamber he'd uncovered, but Cody's vantage from above let us watch on our mobiles. Prof didn't descend far before turning around and striding up again, dragging someone by the collar. Back on the street, he tossed the person aside. The figure fell limply to the ground, neck at an unnatural angle.

"A decoy," Prof barked. His voice carried through the square. "Larcener *is* a coward, I see."

"Decoy?" Megan said, taking my rifle from me and zooming in on the body.

"Ooooh," I whispered, excited. "Larcener absorbed Dead Drop. I wondered if he was ever going to do that."

"Talk normal-person, Knees," Megan said. "Dead Drop?"

"An Epic who used to live in the city. He could make copies of himself—kind of like Mitosis, but Dead Drop could make only a few at a time. Three, I think? The copies each retained his other powers though. And, well, you know how Larcener is…."

The other two looked at me blankly.

"He's an assumer….Don't you know what one does?"

"Sure," Cody said over the line. "Makes an ass out of you and Mer. Hate that guy."

I sighed. "You people know very little, for being a specialized team trained to hunt Epics."

"Maintaining lists of Epics and their powers was Tia's job," Abraham said. "Now yours. And we haven't had our briefing."

After a few days in the city, spent investigating who was here and who wasn't, I had planned to sit them down and explain all the Epics they needed to watch for. I probably should have prepped them for Larcener early. We'd been too focused on Prof.

"An assumer," I said, "is the opposite of a gifter. Larcener steals powers from other Epics—it's his one natural ability, but he's *very* powerful. Most assumers only 'rent' the powers, so to speak. Larcener can take another Epic's abilities *permanently,* and he can keep as many as he wants. He's got an entire collection of them. If Prof found a clone, it means Larcener grabbed Dead Drop's powers—an Epic who could create a decoy of himself, imbue it with his consciousness and powers, then retreat to his real body if the decoy was threatened."

I took my gun back from Megan and studied the decoy. It was decomposing quickly now that it had been killed, the skin melting off the bones like a marshmallow slipping off its roasting stick. Undoubtedly this was how Prof had recognized that he didn't have the real Larcener.

"Larcener makes other Epics *very* uncomfortable," I explained. "They don't like the idea that someone might be able to take their abilities. Fortunately for them, he's not very ambitious, and has always been content to stay in Ildithia. The Coven relied on him—or the idea of him—to keep other Epics from moving in on their territory…."

Megan and Abraham were rolling their eyes at me now.

"What?" I demanded.

"You look like you just found an old hard drive," Megan said, "full of lost songs by your favorite pre-Calamity band."

"This stuff is cool," I grumbled, inspecting Prof. He seemed thoroughly displeased by what he'd discovered in that hole. Now he was contemplating the market, which I could see from out here was packed like Mizzy had said.

"I don't like that look on his face," Abraham said.

"Guys," Mizzy said, "I think I'm by a wall to the outside. I can see sunlight through it if I squint. Maybe we can get me out that way."

Abraham looked at Megan. "Can you make a portal into another dimension, where the wall isn't there?"

Megan looked skeptical. "I don't know. Most of what I can do is ephemeral, unless I've recently reincarnated. I can trap someone in another world for a time, so long as it's very similar to our own—or pull that world into ours. But they're only shadows, and sometimes things seem to reset after the shadow fades."

Prof was on the move, striding toward the marketplace. He snapped his fingers, and Dynamo hurried over to him. A moment later when Prof spoke, his voice boomed through the area, as loud as if enhanced by a speaker.

"I am going to destroy this building," Prof said, pointing at the market. "And all of those nearby."

Ah, right, a part of me thought. *Dynamo. He has sound manipulation.*

The rest of me was horrified.

"Everyone who wishes to live," Prof continued, "must come out here to the square. Those who run will die. Those who remain will die. You have five minutes."

"Oh, hell," Cody said over the line. "You want me to pop him? Make a distraction?"

"No," I said. "He'd come for you, and we'd trade one problem for another." I looked at Megan.

She nodded. If *she* created a distraction and Prof came for her, she'd reincarnate. Sparks. I hated thinking of her ability to die as some kind of disposable resource.

Hopefully we wouldn't need that.

"Abraham, fall back and support Cody," I said. "If something goes wrong, you two continue with the plan to make a safehouse in the city. Be sure he doesn't spot you."

"Roger," Abraham said. "And you two?"

"We're going to get to Mizzy," I said. "Megan, can you conjure up some temporary faces for us?"

"Not a problem." She concentrated and changed in a split second—eyes the wrong color, a face that was too round, and hair that was black instead of golden. I assumed I'd undergone a similar transformation. I took a deep

breath, then handed my rifle to Abraham. Though I'd seen people in Ildithia carrying guns, mine was far too advanced. It would draw attention.

"Let's go," I said, slipping out from behind the cover and joining the groups of people who were—timidly—leaving buildings and the market to stand before Prof.

16

MIZZY was in the parking garage on the other side of the street from us, which presented a problem. “How close do you need to be to give her an illusory face?” I whispered to Megan.

“The closer the better,” she whispered back as we moved into the crowd. “Otherwise, I risk catching more people in the ripple between worlds.”

So we had to cross the street in front of Prof without drawing attention. He was fully in the grip of his powers, so he’d be selfish to the extreme, completely lacking the ability to empathize. It wouldn’t matter who we were or what we looked like; if someone inconvenienced him, he’d kill them as easily as another man swatted a mosquito.

I slumped my shoulders and pinned my eyes to the ground. The act was still second nature to me; they’d drilled it into us at the Factory. I used it now to become inconspicuous as I stepped away from the mass of other people and headed eastward across the street, moving purposefully, yet careful to keep my posture hunched and subservient.

I shot a furtive glance over my shoulder to see if Megan was following, and she was—but she stood out like a hammer in a birthday cake. She was obviously trying to look innocuous, hands shoved in her pockets, but she walked too tall, too unafraid. Sparks. Prof would spot her for certain. I reached out and took her hand, then whispered to her, “You need to be more beaten down, Megan. Pretend you’re carrying a lead statue of Buddha on your back.”

“A…what?”

"Something heavy," I said. "It's a trick we learned in the Factory."

She cocked her head at me, but then slouched. That was better, and I was able to enhance it by clinging to her in a frightened way, pushing the back of her head so that she bowed it farther while we walked arm in arm. My shuffling—while acting extra nervous and dodging out of the way of others when they got too close—got us about halfway across the street, but then the press of people grew too great.

"Bow!" Prof bellowed at us. "Kneel before your new master."

The people went down in a wave, and I had to tow Megan with me to follow. Never before in our relationship had the disparity between us been so obvious. Yes, she had Epic powers and I didn't—but at the moment, that distinction seemed slight compared to the fact that she obviously had *no concept* of how to properly cower.

I was strong. I fought, and I didn't accept Epic rule. But Calamity…I was still human. When an Epic spoke, I jumped. And though I seethed inside, when one told me to kneel, I did it.

The crowd hushed as more people piled out of the garage, filling the street, kneeling. I couldn't see much with my head down. "Mizzy?" I hissed. "You out yet?"

"Near the back," she whispered over the line. "By a light post with blue ribbons on it. Should I run?"

"No," I said. "He's watching for that."

I glanced up at Prof, who stood imperiously before us, new Epic lackey at his side, Stormwind hovering in her prison beyond. Prof scanned the crowd, then turned sharply as someone exited a nearby building and sprinted away.

Prof didn't capture her in a globe of force; instead, he raised his hands to the sides and two long spears made of light, almost crystalline in shape, appeared and shot toward the fleeing woman. They speared her through, dropping her—crumpled—to the street.

I swallowed, brow damp with sweat. Prof stepped forward, and something glowing shot out beneath his feet. A pale green forcefield that made a path for him. His own personal roadway, it elevated him three or four feet above us, so that when he walked he didn't have to risk brushing against one of the huddled figures.

We crouched lower, and I pulled the earpiece from my ear, worried it might remind him of the Reckoners, though we weren't the only ones to use

them. Megan did likewise.

"The fight for Ildithia is over," Prof said, his voice still amplified. "You can see that your most powerful Epic master, Stormwind, is mine. Your onetime leader hides as a coward from me. *I* am your god now, and with my arrival I create a new order. I do this for your own good; history has proven that men cannot care for themselves."

He stopped uncomfortably close to me on his radiant pathway. I kept my eyes down, sweating. Sparks, I could hear him breathe in before every proclamation. I could have reached out and touched his feet.

A man I loved and admired, a man I'd spent half my life studying and hoping to emulate. A man who would kill me without a second thought if he knew I was there.

"I will care for you," Prof said, "so long as you do not cross me. You are my children, and I your father."

It's still him, I thought. *Isn't it?* Twisted though they were, those words reminded me of the Prof I knew.

"I recognize you," a voice whispered beside me.

I started, turning, and found *Firefight* kneeling beside me. He wasn't aflame like he had been at the Foundry; right now he looked like a normal man, wearing a business suit with a very narrow tie. He knelt but did not cower.

"You're David Charleston, aren't you?" Firefight asked.

"I…" I shivered. "Yes. How did you get here? Are we in your world or mine?"

"I don't know," Firefight said. "Yours, it would seem. So in this world, you live still. Does *he* know?"

"He?"

Firefight faded before he could answer, and I found myself staring at a frightened young man with spiky hair. He seemed baffled that I'd been speaking to him.

What had all *that* been? I glanced toward Megan, who knelt on my other side, then nudged her. She looked at me.

What? she mouthed.

What was that? I mouthed back.

What do you mean?

Prof continued to walk through the crowd, a glowing field forming

before his feet as he stepped. His path rounded, and he came back along on my other side. “I have need of loyal soldiers,” he declared. “Who among you wish to serve me, and be lords over your inferiors?”

About two dozen opportunists in the crowd stood up. Serving Epics so directly was dangerous—merely being in their presence could get you killed—but it was also the one way to get ahead in the world. I felt sick to see how eagerly some of the people stood, though the majority of the crowd remained kneeling, too scared—or too sensible—to throw their lot in with a new Epic when he hadn’t yet established total dominance.

I’d have to ask Megan more about Firefight later. For now, I had a plan. Kind of.

I took a deep breath, then stood up. Megan glanced at me, then stood as well. *What are we doing?* she mouthed.

This will let us move through the crowd, I mouthed back. *It’s the only way to get to Mizzy.*

Prof stood on his glowing walkway, hands behind his back. He studied the people in the crowd, surveying them. He turned about, looking directly at the two of us, and I swallowed nervously. This *could* be a way to weed out those whose loyalty was too fleeting. His next step could be to kill those of us who had stood.

No. I knew Prof. He’d realize that in murdering those most eager to serve, he’d have trouble finding servants in the future. He was a leader, a builder. Even as an Epic, he wouldn’t discard useful resources unless he considered them a threat.

Right?

“Good,” Prof said. “Good. I have a task for you all.” He held his hands out, and I thought I felt something vibrate. A familiar sensation from the days, months ago, when I’d worn the gloves and used Prof’s power.

I towed Megan to the side as Prof released a wave of power over the top of the crowd. The air warped, and the entire parking garage behind us exploded to salt dust. People screamed and dropped through the collapsing powder.

“Go,” Prof said, waving toward the destruction of the parking garage. “Execute those still living who disobeyed my will and hid as cowards.”

The twenty-something of us jumped into motion. Though the drop had already hurt, or killed, those on the upper two floors of the garage, there

would be others who hadn't fallen far—or who were hiding in the underground portion.

Prof turned to resume his inspection of the crowd. That gave Megan and me our opening. We veered, using the pole Mizzy had indicated as a reference point. There she was, huddling down with a hoodie—I had no idea where she'd gotten it—covering her head. She glanced at us, and I gave her a thumbs-up.

She didn't hesitate. She sprang to her feet and joined us, and in an eyeblink Megan had changed Mizzy's features to something similar but unrecognizable.

"Megan?" I said.

"See that wall over there?" she said. "The one by the ramp leading to where the garage used to be? I'll create duplicates of us once we reach it. When they appear, drop down by the wall."

"Got it," I said, and Mizzy nodded.

We hit the location indicated, a salt ramp that now ended abruptly to our left. One version of the three of us split off and started up the ramp. The duplicates wore our clothing, and had the same fake faces we'd been wearing. Three people from another reality, living in Ildithia. It hurt my brain sometimes to wonder how all this worked. Those faces Megan had overlaid us with…did that mean these three were doing the same things we were? Were they versions of us, or were they completely different people who had somehow ended up living lives very like our own?

The three of us—the real three—dropped and ducked behind the wall as our doppelgangers reached the edge of the ramp and hopped off. We were shielded from Prof and the crowd by this wall, but I still felt horribly conspicuous as we army-crawled across the ground toward an alleyway.

A gust of wind carried dust across us, and it stuck to my face, tasting sharply of salt. I still wasn't used to how dry it was in this city; my throat felt ragged from just breathing.

We made it to the alley without incident, and our doppelgangers disappeared into the pits of the destroyed parking garage. I wiped the dust from my skin as Mizzy made a face, sticking out her tongue. "Yuck."

Megan settled on the ground beside the wall, looking exhausted. I knelt beside her, and she grabbed my arm and closed her eyes. "I'm fine," she whispered.

She'd still need time to rest, so I gave it to her. I didn't miss that she

started rubbing her temples to try to massage away a headache. I knelt by the edge of the alleyway so I could make sure we were safe. Prof continued to walk among the crowd, passing the place where Mizzy had been hiding. He occasionally made someone look up and meet his gaze.

He must have a list of descriptions of Epics, I thought, *or other malcontents in the city.*

He was here for a purpose. I couldn't believe that Prof had randomly picked Ildithia to rule. And I was increasingly suspicious that the secrets to why he did what he did came from the things he'd found when he'd taken power from Regalia.

I didn't lure Jonathan here to kill him, child, Regalia's voice echoed in my head. *I did it because I need a successor.*

What did Ildithia hide that had drawn Prof's attention?

Behind me, Mizzy gave Abraham and Cody an update. I kept my attention on Prof. He looked not unlike Steelheart, who—though taller and more muscular—had stood frequently in that same domineering pose.

Out in the square, a baby started crying.

My breath caught. I spotted the woman clutching her baby, not far from where Prof stood. She frantically tried to soothe the child.

Prof raised his hand toward her, a look of annoyance on his face. The sound had jarred him out of his contemplations, and he sneered toward the disturbance.

No…

You learned quickly: Don't bother the Epics. Don't draw attention. Don't annoy them. They'd kill a man for the simplest of things.

Please…

I didn't dare breathe. I was in another place for a moment. Another crying child. A hushed room.

I looked into Prof's face, and despite the distance, I was certain I saw something there. A struggle.

He spun and stalked away, leaving the woman and her child alone, barking at his new Epic lackey. The forcefield sphere holding Stormwind trailed after him, and he left a bewildered crowd.

"We ready to go?" Megan asked, standing up.

I nodded, letting out a long, relieved breath.

There was still something human inside Jonathan Phaedrus.

17

"I *did* see him, Megan," I said, unzipping my backpack. "I'm telling you, Firefight was there in the crowd."

"I'm not doubting you," she said, leaning against the pink saltstone wall of our new hideout.

"Point of fact," I said, "I believe you were doing *exactly that.*"

"What I said is that I didn't pull him through."

"Then who did?"

She shrugged.

"Can you be absolutely sure he didn't slip through?" I said, taking several changes of clothing out of my pack and kneeling by the trunk that was going to be my sole piece of furniture. I stuffed the clothing inside, then looked at her.

"On occasion, when I pull a shadow from another world, the fringes bleed," Megan admitted. "It usually only happens when I've just reincarnated, when my powers are at their fullest."

"What about when you're stressed or tired?"

"Never before," she said. "But…well, there are a lot of things I haven't tried."

I looked up at her. "Why not?"

"Because."

"Because why? You have amazing, reality-defying powers, Megan! Why not experiment?"

"You know, David," she said, "you sure can be stupid sometimes. You

have lists of powers, but you don't have any idea what it's *like* to be an Epic."

"What do you mean?"

She sighed, then settled down on the floor next to me. There were no beds or couches yet—our new hideout wouldn't ever be as lush as the one in Babilar had been. But it was as secure as we could make it. We'd built it ourselves over the past few days, hiding it as one of the large "cancerous" lumps of salt that grew across Ildithia.

I'd given Megan some time at first, not wanting to push her about Firefight. She was often evasive for a few days after she used her powers strenuously, as if even thinking about the powers gave her a headache.

"Most Epics aren't like Steelheart, or Regalia," Megan explained. "Most Epics are small-time bullies—men and women with just enough power to be dangerous, and just enough taste of the darkness to not care who they hurt.

"They didn't like me. Well, Epics don't like most anybody, but me especially. My powers frightened them. Other realities? Other versions of *them*? They hated that they couldn't define limits to what I could do, but at the same time my powers couldn't protect me. Not actively. So…"

"So?" I asked, scooting closer, putting my arm around her.

"So they killed me," she said, shrugging. "I dealt with it, learned to be more subtle with my powers. It wasn't until Steelheart took me in that I had any kind of security. He always did see the promise of what I did, rather than the threat.

"Anyway, it's like I've told you. I took what my dad had taught my sisters and me about guns, and I became an expert. I learned to use guns to mask the fact that my powers couldn't hurt anyone. I hid what I could truly do, became Steelheart's spy. But no, I didn't experiment. I didn't want people to know what I could do, didn't even want *him* to know the extent of my powers. Life has taught me that if people learn too much about me, I end up dead."

"And reincarnating," I said, trying to be encouraging.

"Yeah. Unless it's not me that comes back, but just a copy from another dimension—similar, but different. David…what if the person you fell in love with really *did* die in Newcago? What if I'm some kind of impostor?"

I pulled her close, uncertain what to say.

"I keep wondering," she whispered. "Is next time going to be *the* time? The time I come back and am obviously different? Will I be reborn with a

different hair color? Will I be reborn with a different accent, or with a sudden distaste for this food or that? Will you know then, once and for all, that the one you loved is dead?"

"You," I said, tipping her chin up to look her in the eye, "are a sunrise."

She cocked her head. "A…sunrise?"

"Yup."

"Not a potato?"

"Not right now."

"Not a hippo?"

"No, and…wait, when did I call you a hippo?"

"Last week. You were drowsy."

Sparks. Didn't remember that one. "No," I said firmly, "you're a sunrise. I spent ten years without sunrises, but I always remembered what they looked like. Back before we lost our home, and Dad still had a job, a friend would let us come up to the observation deck of a skyscraper in the morning. It had a dramatic view of the city and lake. We'd watch the sun come up."

I smiled. It was a good memory, me and my father eating bagels and enjoying the morning cold. He'd always make the same joke. *Yesterday, son, I wanted to watch the sunrise. But I just wasn't up for it….*

Some days, the only time he'd been able to make for me had been in the morning, but he'd always done it. He'd gotten up an hour earlier than he needed to get to work, and he'd done it after working well into the night. All for me.

"So, am I going to get to hear this glorious metaphor?" Megan said. "I'm twinkling with anticipation."

"Well, see," I said, "I would watch the sun rise, and wish I could capture the moment. I never could. Pictures didn't work—the sunrises never looked as spectacular on film. And eventually I realized, a sunrise isn't a moment. It's an event. You can't capture a sunrise because it changes constantly—between eyeblinks the sun moves, the clouds swirl. It's continually something new.

"We're not moments, Megan, you and me. We're events. You say you might not be the same person you were a year ago? Well, who is? I'm sure not. We change, like swirling clouds and a rising sun. The cells in me have died, and new ones were born. My mind has changed, and I don't feel the thrill of killing Epics I once did. I'm *not* the same David. Yet I am."

I met her eyes and shrugged. “I’m glad you’re not the same Megan. I don’t want you to be the same. My Megan is a sunrise, always changing, but beautiful the entire time.”

She teared up. “That…” She breathed in. “Wow. Aren’t you supposed to be bad at this?”

“Well, you know what they say,” I told her, grinning. “Even a clock that runs fast is still right twice a day.”

“Actually…You know what, never mind. Thank you.”

She kissed me. Mmmmm.

Some time later, I stumbled from my quarters, ran a hand through my disheveled hair, and went to get something to drink. Cody was on the other side of the hallway, finishing the hideout’s roof there with the crystal-growing device that Knighthawk had given us. It looked kind of like a trowel, the kind you’d use to smooth concrete or plaster. When you pulled it along the salt, the crystal structure would extend and create a sheet of new salt. With the glove that came with the device, you could mold that new salt how you wanted for a short time, until it hardened and stayed strong.

We called it Herman. Well, I called it Herman, and nobody else had come up with something better. We’d used it to grow this entire building in an alleyway over the course of two nights, expanding upon a large lump of salt that had grown there already. This place was on the northern rim of the city, which was still growing, so that the half-finished structure wouldn’t look odd.

The nearly finished hideout was tall and thin, going up three narrow stories. In places, I could reach out and touch both walls at once. We’d made the outside of it look like lumps of rock to match the other growths like this in the city. All in all, we’d decided we preferred a place that was more secure, built ourselves, rather than moving into one of the houses out there.

I headed down the steep pink crystal steps to the next level, the kitchen —or at least where we’d set up a hot plate and water jug, along with a few small appliances powered by one of the jeeps’ power cells.

“Finally done unpacking?” Mizzy asked me, wandering by with the coffeepot.

I stopped on the bottom step. “Uh…” Actually, I hadn’t finished.

“Too busy smooching, eh?” Mizzy said. “You *do* realize that without doors, we can kinda hear everything.”

"Uh…"

"Yeaaaah. I wish there were a rule against team members making out and stuff, but Prof would never have done that, considering that him and Tia were a thang."

"A thang?"

"It's a word you probably shouldn't ever say again," she said, handing me a cup of coffee. "Abraham wanted to see you."

I set the coffee aside and got a cup of water instead. I could never see why people drank that stuff. It tasted like soil boiled in mud, with a topping of dirt.

"You still have my old mobile?" I asked Mizzy as she climbed the steps. "The one Obliteration broke?"

"Yup, though it's cracked pretty good. Saved it for parts."

"Grab it for me, will you?"

She nodded. I climbed down to the ground floor, where we'd stashed most of our supplies. Abraham knelt in one of the two rooms here, lit only by the light of his mobile—the upper two floors had hidden skylights and windows, but not much filtered down this far. We'd built him a worktable here out of saltstone, and he was going over the teams' weapons one at a time, cleaning and checking them.

Most of us were perfectly willing to do it on our own, but…well, there was something comforting about knowing that Abraham had approved your gun. Besides, my Gottschalk was no simple hunting rifle. With electron-compressed magazines, hyperadvanced scope, and electronics systems that hooked into my mobile, I would be able to do only the basics on my own. It was the difference between putting ketchup on your hot dog and decorating a cake. Best to let an expert take over.

Abraham nodded to me, then waved toward his pack nearby on the floor, which hadn't been completely unloaded. "I brought something back for you during my trip out to the jeeps."

Curious, I walked over and rummaged in the pack. I pulled out a skull.

Made entirely of steel, it reflected the mobile's light with its eerie, smooth contours. The jaw was missing. That had been separated from it in the blast that had killed this man, the man who had named himself Steelheart.

I stared into those eye sockets. If I had known then that there was a chance of redeeming Epics, would I have pushed forward with my insistence on killing him? Even now, holding this skull made me think of my father—

so hopeful, so *confident* that the Epics would turn out to be the saviors of mankind, not its destroyers. Steelheart, in murdering my father, represented the ultimate betrayal of that hope.

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that," Abraham said. "I threw it in at the last minute, because there was space."

I frowned, then set the skull on a salt shelf overhead. I dug farther in the pack and located a heavy metal box. "Sparks, Abraham. You *carried* this in?"

"I cheated," he said, snapping the trigger guard assembly onto my rifle. "Gravatonics at the bottom of my pack."

I grunted, lugging out the box. I thought I recognized it. "An imager."

"Thought you might want one," Abraham said. "To set up the plan, like we used to do." Prof would often call the team into a room to go over our plans, and he used this device to project ideas and images onto the walls.

I wasn't nearly that organized. I turned on the imager anyway, plugging it into the power cell Abraham was using. The imager scattered light through the room. It wasn't calibrated to this location, so some of the images were fuzzy and distorted.

It showed Prof's notes. Scribbled lines of text, as if made in chalk on a black background. I walked to the wall and felt at some of the scribbled writings. They smudged as if real, and my hand made no shadow on the wall. The imager wasn't like an ordinary projector.

I read through some of the notes, but there was little of relevance here. These were from when we'd been fighting Steelheart. Only one sentence struck me: *Is it right?* Three solitary words, alone in their own corner. The rest of the writing was cramped, words fighting with one another for space like too many fish in a tiny tank. But these sat on their own.

I looked back at Steelheart's skull. The imager had interpreted it as part of the room and had projected words across its surface.

"How's the plan?" Abraham asked. "I assume you have something brewing?"

"A few things," I said. "They're kind of random."

"I'd expect nothing less," Abraham said, a hint of a smile on his lips as he affixed the stock onto the Gottschalk. "Shall I gather the others into one of the rooms so we can talk about it?"

"Sure," I said. "Grab them, but not in one of the rooms."

He looked at me, questioning.

I knelt and switched off the imager. “Maybe we’ll use this another day. For now, I want to go for a walk instead.”

18

MIZZY tossed me the broken mobile as she joined the rest of us on the street outside our hideout. We kept the place hidden by slipping out through a secret door into the mostly abandoned apartment building next to us. It housed no family, only loners who couldn't find their own to join, which we hoped would make them pay less attention to strangers like us.

"Security set up?" I asked Mizzy.

"Yup. We'll know if anyone tries to enter the place."

"Abraham?" I asked.

He shook his pack, which contained our data pads, our extra power cells, and the two pieces of Epic-derived equipment that Knighthawk had given us. If someone did rob our hideout, all they'd get away with were a few guns, which were replaceable.

"That was under five minutes," Cody said. "Not bad."

Abraham shrugged, but seemed pleased. This hideout was far less secure than others we'd used; that meant either leaving at least two of us behind to guard at all times, or coming up with a routine pull-out protocol when we went on operations. I liked the second idea far better. It would let us field larger teams in the city without worrying. Either way, we'd had Mizzy set up some sensors on the door that, if opened, would send our mobiles warnings.

I slung my rifle over my shoulder—Abraham had scuffed it up, then painted over a few portions to make it look both more battered and less advanced at the same time. That should help me not draw attention. Each of us wore a new face granted by Megan. It was early afternoon, and I found it

odd how many people were about. Some hung laundry; others walked to or from the market. A large number were carrying possessions in sacks, having been ousted from the decaying side of the city and sent in search of someplace new to live. This sort of thing seemed constant in Ildithia; someone was always moving house.

I didn't see anyone alone—the kids playing ball in an empty lot were watched by no fewer than four elderly men and women. Those heading to market went in pairs or groups. People congregated on steps up to houses, and quite a few had rifles nearby, though they laughed and smiled.

It was a strange kind of peace. The atmosphere implied that so long as everyone stuck to their own business, everyone would get along. I was disturbed to see how many of the groups seemed segregated along racial lines though. Our group with mixed ethnicities was irregular.

"So, lad," Cody said, walking beside me with hands shoved into the pockets of his camo pants. "Why are we out on the street again? I was planning on a wee nap this afternoon."

"I didn't like the idea of being cooped up," I said. "We're here to save this city. I don't want to sit and plan in a sterile little room, away from the people."

"Sterile little rooms are secure," Megan said from behind, where she walked with Abraham. Mizzy was to my right, humming to herself.

I shrugged. We could still talk and not be overheard. People on the street kept to themselves, and gave way when others approached them. The smaller groups actually demanded more respect—when one person did pass walking alone, everyone moved to the other side of the street in a subtle motion. A solo man or woman might be an Epic.

"This," I said as we walked, "is what passes for a functional society these days. Each group with their territory, each with an implicit threat of violence. This isn't a city, it's a thousand communities one step from war with one another. It's the best the world has to offer. We're going to change that, once and for all. And it starts with Prof. How do we save him?"

"Make him confront his weakness," Mizzy said. "Somehow."

"We have to find it first," Megan noted.

"I have a plan for that," I said.

"What, really?" Megan asked, moving up so she was walking beside Cody. "How?"

I held out the broken phone and wiggled it.

“Folks,” Cody said, “looks like the lad’s finally snapped and gone completely mental. I take full credit.”

I got out my working mobile and wrote a text to Knighthawk. *Hey. I’ve got a mobile with a broken screen here. Battery is in though. Can you still track it?*

He didn’t respond immediately.

“Let’s assume that I *can* discover Prof’s weakness,” I said. “Where do we go from there?”

“Hard to say,” Abraham answered. He was carefully watching everyone else on the street as we made our way down it. “The nature of the weakness often defines the plan’s shape. It could take months to perfect the right approach.”

“I strongly doubt that we have months,” I said.

“I agree,” Abraham said. “Prof has plots of his own, and he’s been here for weeks already. We don’t know why he is here, but we certainly don’t want to wait around and see. We need to stop him quickly.”

“Besides,” I added, “the longer we wait, the greater the chance Prof will notice us.”

“I think you’re trying to do things backward, lad,” Cody said, shaking his head. “We can’t plot anything without the weakness.”

“Though perhaps—” Abraham started.

I looked at him.

“We do have something of a trump card,” he said, nodding toward Megan. “We have a team member who can make *anything* real. Perhaps we can begin planning a trap, with the assumption that whatever he fears, Megan can create it.”

“That’s a leap,” Mizzy said. “What if he fears…I don’t know, a sentient taco.”

“I could probably make that,” Megan said.

“Okay, fine. What if he fears being afraid? Or being proven wrong? Or something else abstract? Don’t a lot of weaknesses come from things like that?”

Mizzy was right. The rest of us fell silent. We passed an old fast-food place on the left, crafted from a beautiful shade of blue salt. More of this region slowly bled to that color as we walked. I didn’t lead us anywhere in particular yet; we’d want to do some intel gathering later today, which was

standard Reckoner protocol after securing a base. For now, I wanted to be out, to be moving. Walking, talking, thinking.

My mobile buzzed.

Sorry, Knighthawk said. *Was taking a koala. What's this about another mobile?*

You said you could track mobiles, I wrote to him. *Well, I've got a broken one here. Can you pinpoint it?*

Leave it somewhere, he wrote, *then move on. Your signals are all too close together.*

I did what he said, setting the mobile on an old trash can and leading the others off a ways.

Yeah, that one is working enough to send a signal, he wrote. *Why?*

I'll tell you in a bit, I sent, jogging back to get the broken phone. From there I turned the team left, heading down a larger street. Some of the salt signs hanging above us had already been knocked down and broken, even though we were in the part of the city that was freshly grown.

"All right," I said, taking a deep breath. "We can't talk specifics about fighting Prof until we get the weakness, but there are still things to plan. For example, we need to figure out how to get him to *face* his fear, not run from it."

"In my case," Megan said, hands in her jacket pockets, "I had to enter a burning building to try to save you, David. That meant I had to be sane enough, away from the powers *long* enough, that I wanted to save you."

"That's not a lot to go on," Mizzy said. "I don't mean to be negative, but maaaan, don't you think we're leaning too much on what happened to one person?"

I remained silent. I hadn't talked to anyone but Megan about it, but something similar had happened to me. I had been…granted Epic powers by Regalia. It had something to do with Calamity, and her relationship with him had allowed her to assert that I would become an Epic.

Those powers hadn't ever manifested. Right before that moment, I'd faced the depths of the waters in an attempt to get out and save Megan and the team. There *was* a connection there. Face your fears. And…what? For Megan, it had meant some control over the darkness. For me, it had made the powers never manifest in the first place.

"We should get more data," I admitted. "Cody, I still want to talk to

Edmund."

"You think he went through the same thing?"

"It's worth asking."

"We've got him hidden away in a safehouse outside Newcago," Cody said. "A place we set up after you and Prof left. I'll get you in touch with him."

I nodded, and we continued in silence. If nothing else, this meeting had helped me define my goals for Ildithia. *Step one, find Prof's weakness. Step two, use it to negate his powers long enough for him to come to his senses. Step three, contrive a way that he has to confront and overcome that weakness.*

We turned another corner and then pulled to a stop. I'd been intending to wind us around toward the outer sections of town, but the path in front of us was blocked off. It must have taken a great deal of effort to move the barricade of metal chains and posts every week, but judging by the men atop the building beyond—armed with wicked-looking rifles—this force had plenty of manpower.

As a group, without needing to say a word, we turned and walked the other way. "Epic stronghold," Cody guessed. "Someone Prof has already subdued, or a neutral party?"

"That's probably Loophole's place," Abraham said, thoughtful. "She was always one of the most powerful Epics in the city."

"Size-manipulation powers, right?" I asked.

Abraham nodded. "Don't know how she fell into the conflict between Prof and Larcener."

"Look into it," I told him. But this raised another issue. "We might want a plan to deal with Larcener. I don't want to get so focused on Prof that we ignore the turf war in Ildithia."

"Well," Mizzy said, "if only we had access to someone with a freakishly large repository of knowledge about Epics, and who can't *help* but tell us about them. Like, all the time."

"Well, it is my thang."

"What did I tell you about that word, David?"

I smiled. "Larcener. By all reports, he was a teenager when Calamity rose—maybe even a kid. One of the youngest High Epics, he's probably in his early twenties right now. He's tall, with dark hair and pale skin; I'll send a photo to your mobiles when we get back. I have a couple good shots of him

in my notes.

"He steals powers, and *keeps* them. All he has to do is touch someone, and he can take their powers. One of the reasons he's so dangerous is that it's impossible to tell what abilities he has, as he has likely never manifested them all. Prime invincibilities include danger sense, impervious skin, regeneration, and now the ability to project his consciousness and powers into a fake body."

Cody let out a long, soft whistle. "That's…quite the list."

"He can also fly, transform objects to salt, manipulate heat and cold, conjure objects at will, and put people to sleep with a touch," I added. "By all accounts, he's also incredibly lazy. He could be the most dangerous Epic alive—but he doesn't seem to care. He stays here, rules Ildithia, and doesn't bother others unless he has to."

"His weakness?" Megan said.

"I've got no idea," I replied as we reached the edge of town. "Everything I know about him is limited to a few widely accepted—but far too general—reports. He's lazy, which we can probably use. He also is reportedly slow to steal new powers; he finds it easier to let Epics who serve him keep their abilities, since they can do the hard work for him. It's said he hasn't taken a new power in years, which was why I was surprised to find he'd absorbed Dead Drop's abilities."

Abraham grunted. "I'd still rather have an idea of his weakness."

"Agreed," I said. "We should do some intel gathering. Today, if possible. I'd rather not fight Larcener if we can avoid it, but I'd like to have a plan anyway."

We walked on, passing buildings that were still growing stumps. They kind of looked like teeth. Giant, lumpy teeth. Beyond those, people worked the fields. Conflicts between Epics in the city didn't change the workers' routine: harvest the grain, give it to whoever ended up in charge. Avoid starving.

The others gave me confused looks as I settled in here to wait, checking my mobile.

You sure it's today? I typed.

The delivery? Knighthawk asked. *That's what the mobiles said. I don't know why they'd lie.*

Sure enough, a caravan of trucks soon approached, laden with goods ordered from UTC's trading network. I wasn't certain if Terms herself would

be in attendance and—though it pained me, since I wanted to see her powers work—I knew I probably shouldn't try to catch a glimpse. I did, however, spot the same overseer from a few days ago, when we'd first entered.

"All right," I said to the team. "I figure this is as good a place as any to get some information. We need intel on Larcener, if we're going to have any shot at guessing his weakness. Go do what it is you do best."

"Make stuff up?" Cody asked, rubbing his chin.

"So you admit it!" Mizzy said, pointing at him.

"Course I admit it, lass. I have seven PhDs. That kind of time spent learning makes a fellow very self-aware." He hesitated. "Course, all *seven* are in Scottish literature and culture, from different schools. A lad's got to be thorough in his approach to his expertise, you see."

I shook my head, approaching the overseer. We wore different faces now, but the man didn't care. He put us to work as easily as he had before, hauling crates from the UTC shipment. The team spread out, engaging the other workers, listening to gossip. I managed to get myself assigned to unloading crates from one of the trucks.

"This is a good place for intel," Abraham said to me softly as he stepped up to get a crate. "But I can't help thinking you have an ulterior motive, David. What are you up to?"

I smiled, slid the broken mobile from my pocket, and wrapped it in a dark cloth. I picked a specific crate, then wedged the slim mobile between the slats in the wood near one of the corners. As I'd hoped, it was practically invisible in there.

I handed the crate to Abraham and winked. "Put this with the others."

He raised an eyebrow toward me, then peeked into the crate. He grinned immediately, then obeyed.

The rest of the afternoon was consumed by work, with us carrying boxes and chatting up the other workers. I didn't learn much, as I was distracted by my plans, but I passed Abraham and Cody engaged in several relaxed conversations with other workers. Mizzy seemed to have the most talent for it.

It would have been nice to have Exel along. That man had been wide as a boat and as morbid as a…um…sinking boat, but he'd been good with people. And good with information.

Thinking about him made me sick. I had convinced myself Prof

couldn't be blamed, but sparks…I'd really liked Exel.

I forced myself to chat up one of the other workers. The older man had an accent that reminded me of my grandmother's. As we walked to the warehouse—a different one this time than last—he seemed to know the city well. He didn't know much about Larcener, though he did complain that the Epic didn't rule strongly enough.

"In the old country," the man explained, "they'd have made short work of a fellow like Larcener. He lets all the Epics in town run about—he's like a grandfather without any sense to discipline his grandkids. A stronger hand, *that's* what's needed here. Police, rules, curfews. People complain about that kind of thing, but it's where we get order. Society."

We passed Cody, who was sharing a cigarette with another worker. Cody appeared to be loafing, but if you watched him you could see that he was carefully minding the locations of the other Reckoners. If you needed to know where someone was, Cody was the person you asked.

I found myself comfortably entering conversations with several other workers. I realized after some time that I was actually more at ease here than I'd been in Babilar, where the people were more open, the society less oppressive. I didn't like what was being done to Ildithia; I didn't like how scared the people were, how divided and brutal life here was proving to be. But I *was* accustomed to it.

Eventually, we accepted our grain rations and made our way to the hideout, sharing intel. Nobody knew Larcener's weakness, though we hadn't expected that it would simply be open knowledge. The problem was, nobody seemed to have *seen* Larcener either. He kept to himself, and there were a shockingly small number of rumors. Mostly about Epics whose powers he'd stolen, leaving them as common people.

I listened to it all with a growing sense of disappointment. It was evening by the time we arrived home, and Mizzy used her mobile to double-check the security sensors on the door. We piled into our narrow pencil box of a hideout and split our separate ways. Cody asked Abraham for the rtich, which he wanted to practice with. I still hadn't been able to get it to do much; maybe he'd have more luck. Megan retreated to her room, Abraham went to tinker with some of the weapons, and Mizzy went to make a sandwich.

I settled down on the ground in the main room on the bottom floor, my back against the wall. The only light was from my mobile, which eventually dimmed. I'd always chided Prof for taking things too slowly, for being too careful. Yet here I was in Ildithia, and my entire planning meeting had

amounted to "Yup, we sure do need to stop Prof. And find Larcener's weakness. Anyone got any ideas? Nope? Oh well, good job anyway."

Looking back, dealing with Steelheart seemed *easy* in comparison. I'd had ten years to prepare for that. I'd had Prof and Tia to work out the details of the plan.

What was I doing here?

A shadow fell on the steps and Megan appeared, lit from the kitchen above. "Hey," she said. "David? Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Just thinking," I said.

She continued down, eventually taking a seat on the ground beside me, lighting her mobile and setting it in front of us for illumination. "We've packed about forty different guns into the city," she muttered, "but not a one of us thought to bring a sparking cushion."

"You surprised?" I asked.

"Not in the least. Good job today."

"Good job?" I said. "We didn't come up with anything."

"Nothing is ever decided at the early meetings, David. You got everyone pointed in the right direction, got them thinking. That's important."

I shrugged.

"Nice work with the hidden mobile too," she noted.

"You saw that?"

"Had me confused until I checked in the box. You think it will work?"

"Worth a try," I said. "I mean, if…" I trailed off as an indicator light hanging on the wall blinked softly.

That meant someone had walked into the entryway of the apartment building beside us. Our fake door led into that entrance, and was one of our security threats. Cody had hidden it by covering some old boards—taken from cargo crates he'd scrounged up—with a thin layer of salt on one side and a black cloth backing. From the outside it looked like any other section of the wall, but you could push it in and slide it open to make a doorway. He warned that if someone was in the entryway, they might be able to hear something coming from the false section. Hence the light, and the instructions for everyone on the ground floor to be quiet if someone was outside the door.

Megan draped her arm around me, yawning, as we waited for the people to move on. We needed a pressure plate out there to let us know when they

were gone, or maybe a camera or something.

Our phones flashed, and the hidden door rattled.

I blinked, then scrambled to my feet, following Megan, who had moved a hair faster than me. Both of us had handguns out a second later, leveled at the door, while Abraham cursed in the room nearby. He charged out a moment later, with his minigun at the ready.

The door wobbled, scraped, then slipped to the side. “Hum,” a voice said outside. I imagined Prof bursting through, having traced us. Suddenly all of our preparations seemed simplistic and meaningless.

I had led the team to its destruction.

The door opened all the way, revealing a backlit figure. It wasn’t Prof, but a younger man, tall and lanky, with pale skin and short black hair. He looked us over, not a glimmer of concern in his eyes, despite facing three armed people.

“That door isn’t going to do *at all,*” the man said. “Far too easy to get through. I thought you people would be capable!”

“Who are you?” Abraham demanded, eyeing me, waiting to see if I gave the order to fire.

I didn’t, though I knew this man. I had several pictures of him in my files.

Larcener, emperor of Atlanta, had come to pay us a visit.

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"OH, put those things down," Larcener said, stepping into the hideout and pushing the door closed. "Bullets can't hurt me. You'll only draw attention."

Unfortunately, he was right. This man was invulnerable in multiple ways. Our guns might as well have been wet noodles.

None of us lowered our weapons.

"What's going on?" I demanded. "Why are you here?"

"Haven't you been paying attention?" Larcener had an unexpectedly nasal voice. "Your friend wants to *kill* me. He's been tearing the whole city apart looking for me! My servants are useless, my Epics too cowardly. They'll switch sides on me in an eyeblink."

He walked forward—making all three of us jump—and kept right on talking. "I figured you'd know how to hide from him, if anyone does. This place looks *horridly* uncomfortable. Not a cushion in sight, and it smells like wet socks." He shivered visibly, then poked into Abraham's workroom.

We crowded around the doorway as, inside, he spun and flopped backward. A large stuffed chair materialized out of nowhere, catching him. He lounged there. "Someone get me something to drink. And try not to make too much noise. I'm tired. You have no idea how nerve-racking it is to be hunted like a common *rat.*"

The three of us lowered our weapons, baffled by the slender Epic, who had started muttering under his breath as he lay, eyes closed, on his new easy chair.

"Um…," I finally ventured. "And if we don't obey you?"

Abraham and Megan looked at me as if I were crazy, but it seemed a

valid question to me.

Larcener cracked open an eye. “Huh?”

“What are you going to do,” I said, “if we don’t obey you?”

“You have to obey me. I’m an Epic.”

“You do realize,” I said slowly, “that we’re the Reckoners.”

“Yes.”

“So…we kinda disobey Epics all the time. I mean, if we listened to what Epics said, we’d be pretty bad at our job.”

“Oh?” Larcener said. “And didn’t you spend your entire career doing *exactly* what an Epic told you?”

Sparks. Did *everyone* know about that? I supposed it wasn’t too tough to guess, now that he’d moved into town. Still. I opened my mouth to object further, but Megan pulled me from the room by my arm, Abraham retreating with us, awkwardly hefting his gun. Cody and Mizzy were on the steps leading down, looking concerned.

We ended up in the middle-floor kitchen, arranged around a narrow saltstone table, speaking in hushed tones.

“Is that really *him*?” Mizzy asked. “Like, the big dude, the king of the city, wazzisnamemagoo?”

“He materialized a chair,” I said. “That’s a very rare power. It’s him.”

“Spaaaarks,” Mizzy said. “You wanna sneak out and blow the place? I got the explosives all ready.”

“Wouldn’t harm him,” Megan said. “Unless we can engage his weakness.”

“Beyond that, this might be his decoy,” I said. “Though I’m not sure how likely it is, Larcener’s real body could be somewhere else. It would be basically unconscious, in a kind of trance. Breathing, heart beating, but not truly awake.”

“Seems a dangerous gamble,” Megan said, “considering how scared he’s acting. Would he want to leave his real self unprotected like that?”

“Who knows,” I said.

“I wonder either way,” Abraham said, “why is he here? His claim of seeking refuge is a front, is it not? He is a most powerful Epic. He wouldn’t need to—”

Footsteps in the stairwell. We all turned as Larcener climbed up to the second floor. “Where is my drink?” he demanded. “You *seriously* couldn’t

remember even one simple order? I can already see that my assumption of your limited capacities was a gross *over*estimation."

The team held weapons in nervous grips, subtly turning to form a unified front against the creature. A High Epic. Prowling through our base unrestrained. We were specks of mud on the window; he was a giant, vengeful bottle of spray cleaner.

Extra-strength lemon scent.

I carefully stood from my seat. The others had all been Reckoners long before me, trained by Prof to be careful, quiet. They'd want to bolt—they'd want to distract Larcener, then flee and set up a different base.

I saw an opportunity instead. "You want to work together," I said to Larcener. "Since we have a common enemy, I'm willing to hear your offer."

Larcener sniffed. "I just want to avoid being murdered. The whole city is turning against me. The *whole city.* Me, the one who protected them, gave them food and shelter in this miserable world! Humans are thankless creatures."

Megan stiffened at that. No, she did *not* like the philosophy that considered humans and Epics to be different species.

"Larcener," I said, "my team is not going to become your servants. I'll let you stay with us, on certain conditions—but *we* are doing *you* a favor."

I could practically hear the breath catch in the throats of the others. Making demands of a High Epic was a sure way to get yourself exploded. But he hadn't hurt us so far, and sometimes this was the only option. Either you juggled the fire, or you let it burn everything down.

"He's made you insolent, I see," Larcener said. "Gave you too much freedom, let you *participate.* If you bring him down, it will be his own fault."

I stood my ground. Finally Larcener's knees bent, a stool—with a plush top—forming for him to settle upon. He slumped. "I could kill you all."

"You could *try,* kiddo," Megan muttered.

I stepped forward, and Larcener looked up at me with a sharp glance, then *cringed.* I'd never seen this behavior from an Epic of his stature. Most of them stood defiant even in the middle of a trap, confident they'd be able to escape it. The only thing that ever seemed to make them uncomfortable was the moment when their weakness exposed them.

I stooped to meet Larcener's eyes. He looked like nothing so much as a frightened child, despite being a few years older than me. He wrapped his

arms around himself and turned aside. “I suppose I have no choice,” he said. “He’ll destroy me otherwise. What are your conditions?”

I blinked. Honestly…I hadn’t gotten that far. I looked toward the others, who shrugged.

“Um, no killing any of us?” Mizzy said.

“What about the one in the stupid clothing?” Larcener asked, pointing at Cody, in his camo gear and old sports team T-shirt.

“Not even him,” I said. Mizzy was probably right to spell it out. Epics could have…strange ideas about social mores. “First rule is that you don’t hurt us or anyone else we bring here. You stay in the base, and don’t use your powers to make our lives difficult.”

“Fine,” Larcener snapped, wrapping his arms around himself tighter. “But when you’re done, I get my city back, right?”

“We’ll talk about that later,” I said. “For now, I want to know how you found us. If Prof can repeat what you did, then we’ll need to pull out immediately.”

“Bah, you’re fine. I can smell Epics; he can’t.”

“*Smell* them?” I asked.

“Sure. Like food being cooked, all right? It lets me find Epics to…you know…” Steal their powers.

So he was a dowser as well as everything else. I shared a look with Megan, who seemed troubled. We hadn’t considered that someone might find us by tracking her powers. Fortunately dowsing was a very rare ability, though it certainly made sense as part of Larcener’s original portfolio.

“Dowsers,” I said, turning back to him. “Are there any others in the city?”

“No, though that monster who led you has some disc-shaped devices that can do it.”

We were safe then. Those discs were like the one we’d had in Newcago; it had required direct contact, and Megan could fool it with her illusions. Prof shouldn’t be able to sniff us out.

“There,” Larcener said. “See, I’m cooperating. Will someone *finally* get me something to drink?”

“Can’t you just make one?” Abraham asked.

“No,” Larcener snapped, and didn’t offer any further explanation, though I knew anyway. He could create only a limited mass of items, and

they faded when he wasn't concentrating on them. Food or drinks he created wouldn't sate, as they'd eventually vanish.

"Very well," I said. "You can stay—but as we said, no hurting us. That includes taking powers from anyone here."

"I already promised that, idiot."

I nodded to Cody, then gestured at Larcener.

Cody tapped the front of his cap in agreement. "Now, what would y'all like to drink?" he said to Larcener. "We have lukewarm water and warm water. Both taste like salt. But on the bright side, I've tested both on old Abraham there, and I'm reasonably confident they won't give ya the runs."

He would fetch Larcener some water, keep him company, and see what he could find out about the man. I grabbed the other three, walking below while Cody distracted the Epic. As we reached the bottom floor, Megan took me by the arm. "I don't like this," she hissed.

"I'm inclined to agree," Abraham said. "High Epics are erratic and untrustworthy. Present company excluded."

"There's something odd about him," I said, shaking my head, looking back up the stairwell and listening to Cody's voice drift down as he started telling Larcener a story about his grandmother over in Scotland. She'd swum to Denmark, apparently?

"I've *felt* that darkness, David," Megan said. "Keeping him in here is like snuggling up to a bomb, content that it's not going to explode simply because you can still hear it ticking."

"Nice simile," I said absently.

"Thanks."

"But inaccurate," I said. "He doesn't follow the pattern, Megan. He's scared, and less defiant than simply arrogant. I don't think he's dangerous. To us right now, at least."

"Are you willing to bet our lives on that feeling, David?" Mizzy asked.

"I've already bet your lives by bringing you here." It was discomforting to say, but it was true. "I've said it before: the only way we're going to win this war against the Epics is by using *other* Epics. Are we going to turn away one of the most powerful when he seems willing to work with us?"

The others fell silent. In the quiet, my mobile buzzed. I glanced at it, half expecting it to be Cody with some addendum to his story that he wanted me to hear. Instead it was Knighthawk.

Your crate is on the move, he wrote.

What, already? I typed back.

Yeah. Out of the warehouse, on its way someplace else. What's going on here? Who ordered that box?

"I need to chase this lead," I said, looking up to the others. "Megan, stay here. If something *does* go wrong with Larcener, you'll have the best chance of getting the others out. Be careful not to touch him, just in case. He can't take your powers without touching you and holding on a good thirty seconds, or so my reports say. Let's be careful and not let him have any direct contact with you."

"Fine," she said. "But it won't come to anything like that. If I see a hint that he's going dark, I'm grabbing the others and we're bolting."

"Deal," I said. "Abraham, I could use some support on this mission. We'll have to go without Megan's disguises, so it could be dangerous."

"More dangerous than staying here?" he asked, looking upward.

"I don't know, honestly. Depends on how bad a mood our target is in."

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AFTER we slipped from the hideout, I showed Abraham my mobile, which displayed a map of the city. A red dot from Knighthawk showed the location of our target.

"With it moving like that, it could take hours to chase down," Abraham said with a grunt.

"We'd better get going then," I said, tucking my mobile into my pocket.

"David, in all kindness and peace," Abraham said, "your plans have already made me exhaust myself today, and now you want to walk across the city again. *Ç'a pas d'allure!* One wonders if you have determined I am getting fat. Wait here." He shoved his large bag into my hands—it held his gun, and was way heavier than I'd expected. As I stumbled, he strode across the street toward a vendor who had set up under a small awning.

You going to tell me what this is about? Knighthawk texted me as I waited.

You're a smart man, I wrote back. *Guess.*

I'm a lazy man. And I hate guessing. Despite that, a moment later, he sent me something. *Is this about the caverns, somehow? Like…you think maybe Larcener is hiding in them, and you're trying to track him?*

That was a clever guess. *Caverns?* I wrote. *What caverns?*

You know. St. Joseph?

The religious figure?

The city, idiot, Knighthawk sent. *The one that used to be in this area. You really don't know?*

Know what?

Wow. And here I was beginning to think you were some kind of omniscient super-nerd when it came to Epics. I actually know something about them you don't? I could sense the self-satisfaction oozing from the screen.

There's an Epic from St. Joseph, I wrote, *that you think I should know about?*

Jacob Pham.

Drawing a blank.

Give me a moment. I'm reveling.

I looked up toward Abraham, eager to be on with things, but the Canadian man wasn't finished with his haggling yet.

You called him Digzone.

I started, feeling a shock of recognition.

The one who created the Diggers, I wrote. *Back in Newcago.*

Yup, Knighthawk sent. *Before he was driving people mad for Steelheart, he came from a sleepy town out there. Half that side of the state is pocketed with the crazy tunnels and caverns he made. But if you didn't know that, then your little plot with the mobile today couldn't be about finding Larcener in them.*

Digzone. He'd been behind the strange labyrinths underneath Newcago. It felt distinctly odd to think about similar tunnels being out here, cut into the ground.

No, what I'm doing today isn't about finding Larcener, I wrote to Knighthawk. *We don't need to find him. He showed up on our doorstep.*

WHAT?

Sorry. Abraham is back with our bikes. Talk to you in a bit.

Let him chew on that. I pocketed the mobile again as Abraham returned, wheeling two rusty bicycles. I regarded them, dubious. "Those look older than two guys in their sixties."

Abraham cocked his head.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm still surprised, sometimes, at the things that leave your mouth," he said, reclaiming his pack. "These bicycles are old because that was all I felt I could pay for without raising suspicion. These should get us where we want to go. You…can ride a bike, can't you?"

"Sure I can," I said, getting onto one of the squeaky things. "At least I used to be able to. Haven't done it in years, but it's like riding a bike, right?"

"Technically, yes."

He watched me with skepticism, which was unwarranted. My hesitance hadn't come from inability, as I proved by riding around on the bike to get used to it.

Bikes reminded me of my father.

I checked my mobile's map—and sent a quick explanation to Knighthawk to keep him from freaking out about Larcener—and we set out, joining a smattering of other cyclists on the street. I hadn't seen these often in Newcago; in the overstreets, the rich had prided themselves on using working automobiles. On the understreets, things had been too twisty and uneven to make bikes practical.

In Ildithia they made perfect sense. Here, the sides of the streets were lined with cars made of salt, but there was open space in the road. Many of the salt cars had been pushed out of the way—they didn't fuse to the roadway, like things had in Newcago—leaving an open and wide road. It was easy, even when you had to weave around a traffic jam nobody had cleared out. These things must grow again each week.

I enjoyed our ride for a short time, though I couldn't help remembering earlier days. I'd been seven when my father had taught me to ride. Way too late to be first learning; all my friends could already do it, and had started to make fun of me. Sometimes I wished I could just go back and slap myself around. I'd been so timid, so unwilling to act.

After I'd turned seven, Father had decided I was ready. Though I'd whined the whole time, he'd never seemed frustrated. Perhaps teaching me to ride had been a way to distract himself from the eviction notices and an apartment that felt too empty, now that it had only two occupants.

For a moment I was there with him, on the street in front of our building. Life hadn't been good then. We'd been in the middle of a crisis, but I'd had *him.* I remembered his hand on my back as he walked with me, then ran with me, then let go so I could ride on my own for the first time.

And I remembered feeling, suddenly, that I *could* do it. A swelling of emotion had overwhelmed me, one that had almost nothing at all to do with riding a bike. I'd looked back at my father's tired grin and had started to believe—for the first time in months—that everything was going to be okay.

That day, I'd recaptured something. I'd lost so much with Mom's death,

but I still had him. I'd known I could do anything, so long as I still had him.

Abraham pulled up to a street corner and halted, yielding to a couple of horse-drawn wagons bearing grain from the harvest, men with battle rifles riding alongside. I stopped beside him, my head lowered.

"David?" Abraham asked. "David, are you…crying?"

"I'm fine," I rasped, checking my mobile. "We turn left here. The crate has stopped moving. We should be able to catch it soon."

Abraham didn't press further and I took off again. I hadn't realized that the pain was still so close to the surface, like a fish who liked to sunbathe. Probably best not to dwell on the memories. Instead, I tried to enjoy the breeze and the thrill of motion. The bikes certainly did beat walking.

We took another corner at an eager speed, then were forced to slow as a group of bikes ahead of us stopped. We pulled to a stop too, and my skin prickled, hairs standing on end. No people on the sidewalks. Nobody carting their possessions toward a new home, as had been prevalent on the other streets. No one leaning out windows they'd broken open.

This roadway was quiet, save for the rattling of bike pedals and a voice, farther up the street.

"Now, this'll just take a minute." A British accent of some flavor I didn't recognize. I grew cold as I caught a glimpse of a man with a shaved head wearing spiked black leather. A little neon sphere hovered to his side, changing colors from red to green. A tag, they sometimes called it. Epics who could manifest their powers visually would sometimes walk around with an obvious display—a glow about them, or a few spinning leaves. Something that said, *Yes, I'm one of* them. *So don't mess with me.*

"David," Abraham said softly.

"Neon," I whispered. "Minor Epic. Light-manipulation powers. No invisibility, but he can put on quite a show—and drill you dead with a laser." Weakness…Did my notes have a weakness for him?

He spoke further with the group in front of us while some men in long jackets approached, carrying a device that looked like a plate with a screen on one side. One of the dowsers that Larcener had mentioned. It was indeed identical to the one I'd seen the team use in Newcago.

Neon's team scanned each person in the group ahead of us, then waved them on. *Prof's hunting Larcener,* I thought. *He wouldn't use one of those to try to find us. He knows Megan can beat them.*

Neon's team motioned us forward.

"Loud noises," I whispered, remembering. "If this goes south, start screaming. It will negate his powers."

Abraham nodded, looking far more confident as the two of us wheeled our bikes forward. There was a chance this team had our descriptions—depending on how worried Prof was about the Reckoners. I was relieved when Neon yawned and had his team scan Abraham, with no look of recognition in his eyes.

The dowser approved Abraham, and the team waved him forward. Then they wrapped the scanner's strap around my arm.

And we stood quietly on the street. It took forever, long enough that Neon stepped over, looking annoyed. I started to sweat, preparing to yell. Would he decide to burn me away out of frustration for slowing him down? He wasn't that important an Epic; the minor ones had to be more careful about wanton murder. If they ruined the working population of a city, the High Epics wouldn't have anyone to serve them.

Finally, lethargically, the machine gave a response. "Huh," Neon said. "Haven't had it take that long before. Let's search the nearby buildings. Maybe someone's in them, making our machine flip." He unhooked the device and waved me away. "Get outta here."

I moved, noticing as I passed that the dowser had given me a negative reading, as it should. I was no Epic.

No matter what Regalia claimed.

I spent the rest of the ride feeling sick, remembering those moments confronting my reflection in the water. Listening to her awful promise.

You were angry at Prof for hiding things from the team, a voice inside me whispered. *Aren't you doing exactly the same?*

That was stupid. There was nothing to hide.

We reached the location where the crate had stopped moving: a street lined with three- and four-story apartment buildings. After two days in the city, I was well aware that the powerful clans looked for locations like this, while what had once been rich suburban homes were now widely ignored. In a world of Epics and rival gangs, living space was far less valuable than security.

The two of us stopped at the mouth of the street. A group of young men no older than me lounged here holding an assortment of old weapons, including one teenager with a crossbow of all things. A large flag flying the

emblem of a stingray fluttered above one of the buildings.

"We're not recruiting," one of the youths said to me. "Beat it."

"You have a visitor among you," I said to them, hoping my guess was correct. "An outsider. Give this person our descriptions."

The youths shared a few looks, then one ran off to do as I ordered. Within moments I knew I'd guessed *something* right, because a good number of older men and women with really *nice* guns came stalking down the street toward us.

"Uh…David?" Abraham asked. "Do you want to say something more, perhaps? That we…"

He trailed off as he spotted one person among the group wearing a hoodie, rifle slung over her arm. The hood made her face difficult to see, but several locks of red hair poked out next to her chin.

Tia.

21

ABRAHAM didn't say anything as the two of us were quickly surrounded by armed people and hustled off the street toward one of the apartment buildings. He simply gave Tia a friendly salute, one finger tapping the middle of his brow. He'd obviously figured out what we were doing long ago.

Tia's people shuffled us into a room with no windows, lit only by a row of candles that were slowly melting onto the countertop of an old kitchen bar. Why bother with candlesticks when your home would be dissolving anyway? Though the room did have an actual wooden door on it, which was rare in this city. It would have to be carted each week to the next location and reattached.

One of the armed Ildithians relieved us of our weapons, while another shoved us down into chairs. Tia stood at the back of the group, arms folded, her face shrouded by that hood. She was slender and short, and her lips—which I could see within the hood's shadows—were drawn into a line of disapproval. She was the Reckoners' second in command, and one of the smartest people I'd ever met.

"David," she said calmly, "in Babilar, you and I met together in our hideout, after you'd gone out to deliver supplies. Tell me what we discussed."

"What does that matter? Tia! We need to talk about—"

"Answer the question, David," Abraham said. "She is testing to see if we are ourselves."

I swallowed. Of course. Any number of Epics could have created doppelgangers of the Reckoners at Prof's command. I tried to recall the event

she was talking about. Why hadn't she picked something more memorable, like when I'd first joined the Reckoners?

She needs something Prof wouldn't know about, I realized.

I started to sweat. I'd been out on the submarine, and…*Sparks,* it was hard to think with those armed men and women staring at me, each as angry as a cabdriver who'd discovered I'd ralphed all over his back seat.

"I met with Prof that day," I said. "I came to the base to report, and we talked about some of the other Epics in Babilar."

"And what…interesting metaphor did you make?"

"Sparks, you expect me to *remember* those?"

"I've heard a few that were rather hard to forget," Abraham noted. "Despite a great deal of time trying."

"Not helping," I muttered. "Uh…mmm…Oh! I talked about using toothpaste for hair gel. No, wait. Ketchup. Ketchup for hair gel, but as I think about it, toothpaste would have been a *way* better metaphor. It hardens stronger, I think, and—"

"It's him," Tia said. "Put your guns down."

"How did you know she was with us, kid?" said one of the Ildithians, a stocky older woman with thinning hair.

"Your shipments," I said.

"We get shipments twice a week," the woman said. "As do most of the sizable families in the city. How would *that* have led you here?"

"Well…," I said.

Tia groaned, putting her hand to her face. "My cola?"

I nodded. I'd spotted it in the crate that day when I'd first seen Prof. Not just any cola; the brand she loved. It was expensive, unique, and worth playing a hunch on.

"I told you," said another Ildithian, a bulky man with a face like a barbecue grill. In that it was ugly. "I told you that accepting this woman among us would be trouble. You said we wouldn't be in danger!"

"I never said that," replied the woman with thinning hair. "I said that helping her was something we needed to do."

"This is worse than you think, Carla," Tia said. "David is smarter than he might first seem, but it's hardly outside of reason that something *he* discovered might be discovered by someone else."

"Uh…," I said.

They all looked at me.

"Now that you mention it," I said, "Prof might know about the cola. At least, he spotted some of it in the boxes the other day."

The people in the room froze, then started shouting to one another, sending messengers, warning their lookouts. Tia pulled off her hood, exposing her short red hair, and rubbed her forehead. "I'm a fool," she said, barely audible over the shouted orders from Carla. "They put in their supply order and asked if I needed anything. I barely gave it any thought. A few cans of cola would be nice…."

Nearby, the ugly Ildithian man entered with the crate that had held the cola and dug through it, discovering the broken mobile. "A Knighthawk mobile?" he said. "I thought these were untraceable."

"It's only a shell," I said quickly. "Convenient to put the bug in, since it had a power supply and antenna." I wasn't giving everything up.

The man accepted that and tossed the mobile to Carla. She removed the battery, then moved to the side of the room with several other people, where they held a quiet conference. When I stood up, ugly-face glared at me, hand on his pistol, so I sat back down.

"Tia?" I asked. It was odd to see her like this, with a rifle slung over her shoulder. She had always run operations for us from positions of relative safety; I didn't think I'd ever seen her fire a weapon. "Why didn't you contact us?"

"Contact you how, David?" she asked, sounding tired. She stepped closer to me and Abraham. "Jonathan had access to our mobile network and knew every one of our hideouts. I didn't even know if you'd survived."

"We tried contacting you in Babilar," I said.

"I was in hiding. He…" She sighed, sitting down on the table next to us. "He was hunting me, David. He came directly to where I'd been set up during the Regalia hit, pulled the sub out of the water, and crushed it. I was out by then, thankfully. But I heard him calling for me. Pleading, begging me to help him with the darkness." She closed her eyes. "We both knew that if this day came, I'd be in more danger than anyone else in the Reckoners."

"I…" What did I say to that? I could imagine how it would feel to have the one you loved begging for your help, all the while knowing it was a trap. I imagined struggling to not give in, to ignore their pleas.

I wouldn't have been strong enough. Sparks, I'd chased Megan halfway

across the country, despite her threatening to kill me.

"I'm sorry, Tia," I whispered.

She shook her head. "I'm prepared for this. Jon and I talked about it, like I said. I can do him one last favor." She opened her eyes. "I see you had the same instinct."

"Not…exactly," Abraham said, sharing a look with me.

"Tia," I said. "We've cracked it."

"It?"

"The secret," I said, growing eager. "The weaknesses, the darkness—they're tied together. Epics all have nightmares about their weaknesses."

"Of course they do," Tia said. "The weaknesses are the only thing that can make them feel powerless."

"It's more than that, Tia," I said. "Way more! The weaknesses are often tied to something the person feared *before* getting their powers. A phobia, a terror. It seems…well, I haven't talked to enough of them, but it seems like becoming an Epic makes the fear worse. Either way, stopping—or at least managing—the darkness *is* possible."

"What do you mean?"

"Fears," I said quietly, only to her. "If the Epic confronts their fear, it drives back the darkness."

"Why?"

"Um…does it matter?"

"You're the one who kept saying that this should all make sense. If there really is a logic behind the weaknesses, then shouldn't there be a logical reason for the darkness?"

"Yeah…yeah, there should be." I sat back. "Megan says—"

"Megan. You brought *her*? She's one of them, David!"

"She's why we know this works. Tia, we can save him."

"Don't give me that hope."

"But—"

"Don't *give me that hope*." She glared at me. "Don't you *dare* do that, David Charleston. You don't think this is hard enough? Planning to kill him? Wondering if there isn't something more I should do? He made me promise. I'm going to keep that promise, damn you."

"Tia," Abraham said softly.

She looked at him as I sat there, stunned by her tone.

"David is right, Tia," Abraham said in his calm way. "We must try to bring him back. If we cannot save Jonathan Phaedrus, then we might as well give up this fight. We cannot kill them all."

Tia shook her head. "You believe he's found the secret, after all this time?"

"I believe he has a good theory," Abraham said. "And Megan *has* learned to control the darkness. If we do not test David's theories, we are fools. He is right. We cannot kill them all. We've been trying the same thing for too long; it is time to do something different."

I suddenly felt very, *very* smart for having brought Abraham along. Tia listened to him. Heck, a rabid Chihuahua having a seizure would stop and listen when Abraham spoke.

The door burst open, and a frantic young woman scrambled into the room. "Sir!" she said to Carla. "Crooknecks. The whole family, three hundred strong, and then some. All armed, and coming this way. He's with them."

"He?" the woman, Carla, asked.

"The new Epic. Sir, we're surrounded."

The room fell silent. The ugly man who had disagreed with Carla earlier turned to her. He didn't speak, but the implication was there in his dark expression. *You've doomed us.*

Abraham stood up, drawing all eyes. "I will need my gun."

"Like hell," Carla said. "You caused this."

"No, I did," Tia said, rising. "We're just fortunate that David got here first."

Carla growled, but then barked for her people to prepare for battle. For all the good it would do. Prof could destroy this neighborhood on his own.

Someone tossed Abraham's pack to him as others rushed out the door. Carla moved to follow them, perhaps to get a look at the foe herself.

"Carla," Tia said. "You can't fight them."

"I doubt they'll give us a choice."

"They might if you give them what they want."

Carla looked at her companions, who nodded. They'd been thinking the same thing.

"No!" I said, standing up. "You can't turn her over."

“You have five minutes to prepare, Tia,” Carla said. “I’ll send runners to talk to the oncoming force, see if I can get them to demand you. We can act like we didn’t know who you were.”

She left us in that windowless box of a room, posting two conspicuous guards at the door.

“I can’t believe—” I began.

Tia cut me off. “Don’t be a child, David. The Stingray Clan was good enough to take me in, listen to my plans. We can’t ask them to die protecting me.”

“But…” I looked at her, pained. “Tia, he’ll kill you.”

“Eventually,” she said. “I might have some time.”

“He murdered Val and Exel immediately.”

“Yes, but me he’ll want to interrogate first.”

“You *do* know it, don’t you,” I said softly. “His weakness.”

She nodded. “He’d rip apart this entire city to get at me. We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t murder everyone in this district, to be certain the secret hasn’t gotten out.”

It made me sick. Steelheart had done something similar on that day, so long ago, when my father and I had seen him bleed.

Tia pressed something into my hand. A data chip. “My plans,” she said. “For bringing Jon down. I’ve had variations on this in mind for years, just in case. But I’ve tailored it specifically to this city and what he’s doing here. David, there’s something bigger going on with him. I’ve been able to get people in to scout near him. I think Regalia must have given him something —some kind of intel on Calamity. I think she *sent him here.*”

“Tia,” I said, looking to Abraham for support. “I suspect some of the same things. But you can’t go with Prof. We *need* you.”

“Then stop him,” she said, “before he kills me.”

“But—”

She crossed the room quickly and grabbed the broken mobile from a table. “You can track this if I stick the battery back in?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Good. Use it to see where he takes me. I didn’t tell any of the Ildithians his weakness, and I can hide behind that truth for a time. They might be safe, and if he asks about you all, I can say I got separated from you in Babilar. He’d spot a lie from me, but I won’t be lying.”

"He will break you eventually, Tia," Abraham said. "He is nothing if not persistent."

She nodded. "Yes, but he'll act kindly at first. I'm certain of it; he'll try and bring me to his side. Only after I refuse will he get brutal." She grimaced. "Trust me, I have *no intention* of being some kind of noble martyr. I'm counting on you. Stop him, and get me out."

Abraham saluted again, more solemn this time. Sparks. He was going to let it happen.

People were calling outside the room. Carla ducked back in. "They've said we have five minutes to turn over the outsider. I think they believe that we didn't know who you were. They also don't seem to know about the other two."

"Jon's paranoia works for us," Tia said. "If *he'd* been hiding here, he'd never have told you who he really was. He'll believe that I was trying to blend in." She looked toward me. "Are you going to make this difficult?"

"No," I said, resigned. "But we *will* get you out."

"Good." She hesitated. "I'll see if I can dig up what he's working on here, what his plot is for this city."

"Tia," Carla said from the doorway. "I'm sorry."

Tia nodded, turning to leave.

"Wait," I said, then continued in a whisper. "The weakness, Tia. What is it?"

"You know it."

I frowned.

"I don't know if your theory is correct," she said. "But…yes, he has nightmares about something. Think, David. In all our time together, what is the one thing you've truly seen him fear?"

I blinked, and realized she was right. I did know. It was obvious. "His powers," I whispered.

She nodded, grim.

"But how does that work?" I demanded. "He can obviously use his own powers. They don't…negate themselves."

"Unless someone else is using them."

*Someone else…*Prof was a gifter.

"When we were younger," Tia whispered urgently, "we experimented

with Jon's powers. He can create lances of light, forcefield spears. He gifted the ability to me. And I—by accident—launched one of those lances at Jon. David, the wound he took that day *didn't regenerate.* His powers couldn't fix it; he took months to recover, healing like a normal person. We never told anyone, not even Dean."

"So someone gifted with one of his powers…"

"Can negate the rest. Yes." She glanced at Carla, who was waving urgently, then leaned in to me, continuing to speak very quietly. "He fears them, David. The powers granted him, the weight they bring. And so he lives his life with a great dichotomy—he takes every opportunity he can to gift his powers away, to let the team use them so he doesn't have to. But each time he does, he gives them a weapon that could be used against him."

She gripped my arm. "Get me out," she said, then turned and rushed to Carla, who led her from the room.

—

They let us watch. From a distance, using scopes atop one of the apartment buildings, where they'd hollowed out a nice little hidden sniper nest. We were attended by a couple of guards who—we'd been promised—would let us go, assuming that Prof took Tia and left without demanding more.

Again I had to watch a man I loved and respected act like someone else. Someone proud and imperious, bathed in a faint green glow from the forcefield disc he stood upon.

I felt so powerless as the Ildithians led Tia up to him, then forced her down on her knees. They bowed and retreated from Prof. I waited, sweating.

Tia was right. He didn't kill her immediately. He surrounded her in a forcefield, then turned and stalked away, her orb trailing behind him.

He never gifted us that power, I thought. *He gifted us forcefield protection in the form of the "jackets," but only in small amounts. The globes, those spears I saw him use the other day…He didn't let us know about those abilities.*

For fear that someday they might be used to kill him. Sparks, how were we going to get him to give away his abilities? I knew his weakness, but approaching it still seemed impossible.

As Tia and Prof left, I closed my eyes, feeling like a coward. Not because I'd failed to save Tia, but because of how badly I'd been wanting her to come with us.

She would have taken over, been in charge. She'd have known what to do. Unfortunately, that burden was now back on me.

22

I was somewhere dark and warm again.

I had memories…voices, like my own, that spoke in harmony. Together we were one. I'd lost those voices somehow, but I wanted them, needed them. I felt an ache, being separated from them.

At least I was warm, and safe, and comfortable.

I knew what to expect, though I could not brace myself in the dream. So the crashes of thunder still shocked me. The peals of terrible, blaring sound, like a hundred raging wolves. Garish, cold, harsh light. Snapping, attacking, assaulting, *smothering*. It came at me, and sought to destroy me.

I shot bolt upright, suddenly awake.

I was back on the floor of the upper room of our hideout. Megan, Cody, and Mizzy slept nearby. Abraham was on watch tonight. With an unknown Epic in the hideout, none of us were comfortable sleeping on our own or in pairs, and we were certain always to post a guard.

Sparks…that nightmare. That *terrible* nightmare. My pulse was still racing and my skin was clammy. My blanket was soaked in sweat; I could probably have wrung out an entire bucketful.

I'm going to have to tell the others, I thought as I sat there in the dark, trying to catch my breath. Nightmares were directly tied to Epics and their weaknesses. If I was having a persistent one…well, it might mean something.

I kicked off my blankets and realized that Megan wasn't in her place. She got up in the night a lot.

I picked my way around the others toward the hall. I didn't like this

fear. I wasn't the coward I'd been as a child. I could face anything. *Anything.*

I reached the hallway and checked the room across from ours. Empty. Where had Megan gotten to?

Abraham and I had returned from the Stingray Clan's base late enough that we'd decided to call it a night and save digging into the new information Tia had given us for tomorrow. I'd told them Prof's weakness, which had set them thinking. That was enough for the moment.

I continued to the steps, my feet bare on the saltstone floor. We had to be very careful with water; spill it, and the ground started to rub off on your feet. Even as it was, I woke up in the mornings with salt crust on my legs. Building a city out of something that could dissolve was decidedly *worse* than building one out of steel. Fortunately I didn't much notice the smell any longer, and even the dryness was starting to feel normal.

I found Abraham on the middle floor, in the kitchen. He was bathed in the light of his mobile, the rtich on his hands and a large globe of mercury hovering in front of him. The mercury certainly had an otherworldly cast: perfectly reflective, it undulated as Abraham moved his hands around it. He drew his palms apart, which caused the large globe of mercury to elongate like a loaf of French bread. The way reflections distorted and shifted on its mirrored surface made me imagine it was showing us a different, distorted world.

"We must be careful," Abraham said softly. "I think I've learned to contain the fumes this metal releases, but perhaps it would be wise for me to find another place to practice."

"I don't like splitting us up," I said, getting myself a cup of water from the large plastic cooler we kept on the counter.

Abraham spread his palm out, and the mercury made a disc in front of him, like a wide plate—or a shield. "It is marvelous," he said. "It conforms perfectly to my commands. And look at this."

He brought the disc down, flat portion facing the ground, then hesitantly stepped *onto* it. It held him.

"Sparks," I said. "You can fly."

"Not exactly," Abraham said. "I cannot move it far while I'm standing on it, and it needs to be nearby for me to manipulate it. But watch this."

The disc of mercury rippled, and a piece of it siphoned off, forming *steps* in front of Abraham. Very thin, very narrow, reflective metal steps. He was able to walk up them, stooping down as he got closer and closer to the

ceiling.

"This will be of great use against Prof," Abraham said. "It is very strong. Perhaps I could use it to counteract his forcefields."

"Yeah."

Abraham glanced at me. "Not enthusiastic?"

"Just distracted. Is Larcener still awake down there?"

"Last I checked," Abraham said. "He does not seem to sleep."

We'd discussed what to do with him, but had come to no conclusions. So far though, he hadn't posed much of a threat.

"Where's Megan?" I asked.

"Haven't seen her."

That was odd. If she'd left, she would have had to pass this way—and I hadn't seen her on the top floor, which was pretty small. Maybe Abraham hadn't noticed her slipping by.

He continued to work with the rtich, climbing down his steps and creating other shapes. Watching him was hard, but mainly for juvenile reasons. We'd all agreed that Abraham should practice with the device, with Cody or Mizzy as backup. Abraham was our primary point man now.

But sparks, that device looked *cool.* Hopefully it would survive our activities here. Once we had Prof and Tia back, I could return to running point, where I belonged.

I left Abraham and walked down to the bottom floor to check on Larcener. I stopped in the doorway to his room.

Wow.

The once-bare walls were now draped with soft red velvet. A set of lanterns glowed on mahogany tables. Larcener lay on a couch as elegant as any we'd had in the Babilar hideout, wearing a pair of large headphones, with his eyes closed. I couldn't hear what, if anything, he was listening to—the headphones were likely connected wirelessly to a mobile.

I stepped into the room. Sparks, it seemed way larger than it had before. I paced it off, and found that it *was* bigger.

Spatial distortion, I thought, adding that to his list of powers. Calamity, that was an incredible power. I'd only heard *rumors* about Epics having it. And his ability to materialize objects from thin air…

"You could beat him," I said.

Larcener said nothing, remaining on his couch, not opening his eyes.

"Larcener," I said, more loudly.

He started, then ripped off his headphones and shot me a glare. "What?"

"You could beat him," I repeated. "Prof…if you were to face him, you might be able to win. I know you have multiple prime invincibilities. Add on top of those the ability to create anything, to distort space…you could beat him."

"Of course I couldn't. Why do you think I'm *here* with you useless idiots?"

"I haven't figured that out yet."

"I don't fight," Larcener said, moving to put his headphones back on. "I'm not allowed."

"By who?"

"By myself. Let others do the fighting. *My* place is to observe. Even ruling this city is probably inappropriate for me."

People, including me, tended to work under the assumption that all Epics were essentially the same: selfish, destructive, narcissistic. But while they *did* share these traits, they also had their own individual levels of strangeness. Obliteration quoted scripture and sought—it seemed—to destroy all life on the planet. Regalia channeled her darkness toward greater and greater schemes. Nightwielder, in Newcago, insisted on working through lesser intermediaries.

Larcener seemed to have his own psychosis. I reached into a bowl on a little marble pedestal beside the door. Glass beads trickled between my fingers. No—diamonds.

"I don't suppose," I said, "you could make me a—"

"Stop."

I glanced at Larcener.

"I should have made this clear at the start," he said. "You get nothing from me. I am not here to give you gifts, nor to make your life easier. I will *not* become some servant."

I sighed, dropping the diamonds. "You don't sleep," I said, trying a different tack.

"So?"

"You gained that power from another Epic, I assume. Did you take that one specifically because of the nightmares?"

He stared at me for a moment, then suddenly tossed his headphones aside and leaped to his feet. He took a single step, but crossed the wide distance between us in an instant.

"How do you know about my nightmares?" he demanded, looming in front of me. Larger. Taller.

I gaped, my heart racing again. Before this, he'd been *determinedly* lazy with us. Now—dwarfed by Larcener, who stood seven feet tall, with a terrible sneer and wild eyes—I felt I was a moment from being destroyed.

"I…" I swallowed. "All Epics have them, Larcener. Nightmares."

"Nonsense," he said. "They are mine. I am unique."

"You can talk to Megan," I said. "She'll tell you she has them. Or you can go find any Epic and beat it out of them. They have nightmares, which are tied to their weaknesses. What the person fears becomes—"

"Stop your lies!" Larcener shouted, then growled at me and spun on his heel, stalking back to his couch and throwing himself down. "Epics are weak because they are fools. They will destroy this world. Give men power, and they abuse it. That is all one needs to know."

"And you've never felt it?" I asked. "The sudden darkness that comes from using your powers, the lack of empathy? The desire to destroy?"

"What are you talking about?" he said. "Silly little man."

I hesitated, trying to read him—and having a tough time of it. Maybe he was constantly consumed by the darkness. He certainly acted arrogant enough.

But he hadn't hurt any of us. He liked to order us around, but not in the way of an Epic, I realized. In the way of a spoiled child.

"You faced it young," I guessed. "You grew up as an Epic, able to get whatever you wanted, but you never felt the darkness."

"Don't be stupid," he said. "I *forbid* you to speak of this idiocy anymore. Darkness? You want to blame the terrible things that Epics do on some nebulous idea or feeling? Bah. Men destroy themselves because that's what they deserve, not because of some mystical force or emotion!"

He has to be facing it continually, I thought. *Whatever his fear is, he must see it every day, and defeat it.* That was what we'd learned with Megan; if she didn't stay vigilant, the darkness crept back toward her.

I slipped from his palace of a room.

"I *do* hate you, you understand," Larcener called from behind.

I glanced in again. He lounged on his couch, and like that he really did look like a kid. A teenager with his headphones on, trying to ignore the world.

"You deserve this," he continued. "People are evil to the core. That's what the Epics prove. That's why you're dying out." He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, away from me.

I shivered, then checked the other room—which was now packed with supplies—for Megan. Not there. Above, Abraham was still practicing in the kitchen. On the top floor, I knocked outside the small bathroom—we'd resorted to using buckets again, unfortunately. Finally I peeked into the other bedroom once more.

Empty. Where—

Wait. Something about that dark room seemed too…um…dark? I frowned and walked into the room, passing through a veil of something. Megan sat cross-legged on the floor on the other side, a small candle on the floor beside her. She was staring out the wall.

Which was now gone.

The wall of the hideout was simply…gone. And there was no city beyond either. Megan looked out upon a nighttime landscape of blowing fields beneath a billion stars. She was rubbing her hand.

She noticed me as I walked up, first reaching for the gun on the floor beside her, then relaxing when she realized who it was. "Hey," she said. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Nah," I said, settling down beside her. "That's quite the view."

"Easy to make," she said. "In so many of the branching possibilities, Ildithia didn't come this direction. It was simple to find one where it isn't here, and the field is empty."

"So what is this, then?" I asked, reaching out. "Is it real?"

My hand felt something—the saltstone wall, though it looked like I was touching empty space.

"Just a shadow, for now," she said.

"But you can go further," I said. "Like you did when saving me from Knighthawk."

"Yes."

"You brought Firefight through," I continued, feeling again at the invisible wall. "Not just his shadow, not just a…projection of the other

world. He himself was here."

"I see your brain working, David," she said, cautious. "What are you thinking?"

"Is there a reality where Prof hasn't given in to his powers?"

"Probably," Megan said. "That's a little change, and very recent."

"So you might be able to bring him here."

"Not for very long," Megan said. "What? You want to replace him in the team? My solutions are temporary. It…" She trailed off, eyes widening. "You don't want a new Prof as a replacement. You want one to *fight ours.*"

"His fear is his powers, Megan. I initially tried to think how to trick him into gifting his abilities to someone—but there's no reason we have to do that when we have you. If you can bring a version of Prof in from another world, we can make them face off, and *bam*…we engage Prof's weakness. Make him confront his own powers in the most direct way possible, and therefore help him defeat the darkness."

She looked thoughtful. "We could try it," she said. "But David, I don't like relying on the powers. My powers."

I looked to where she was rubbing her hand. A fresh burn. I glanced at the candle.

"This might be the only way," I told her. "He certainly won't be expecting it. If we're going to save Tia…"

"You still want me to practice," she said. "Go further than I've gone before."

"Yes."

"That's dangerous."

I didn't reply. I knew it was, and I knew I shouldn't be asking this of her. It wasn't fair. But sparks…Tia was in Prof's hands. We had to do something.

"All right," Megan said. "I'm going to try to alter reality a little further. You might want to move back from the wall."

I did so. Megan's face darkened in concentration.

And the entire building vanished, leaving me alone, hanging in the sky, in an unfamiliar world.

23

MY stomach lurched as I dropped a good twenty feet before crashing into some thick brush. The growth broke my fall, but the landing knocked the wind out of me. I lay there, trying to gasp but unable to draw in breath. Finally, painfully, I managed to suck air into my lungs.

A star-filled sky spun and wavered above me, my watering eyes making it difficult to see. Sparks…there were so many stars, and in such strange patterns. Clusters, ribbons, fields of light upon the black. I still wasn't used to it. In Newcago the sky had been veiled in darkness by Nightwielder, so I'd had to imagine stars. Over the years my memories had grown fuzzy, and I'd started to imagine the stars spaced evenly, like in my vague recollections of picture books.

The reality was far messier. More like cereal spilled on the floor. I groaned and managed to sit up. *Well,* I thought, looking around, *I probably deserved that.* What had happened? Had I been sucked into Megan's shadow dimension?

It seemed that way at first, though I was confronted with an oddity: Ildithia was here, off in the distance. Hadn't Megan said that in her shadow world, it hadn't come this way?

Something else was wrong. It took me an embarrassingly long time to figure it out.

Where was Calamity?

The stars were all there, sprinkling the sky, but the omnipresent red spot was gone. That was discomforting. Calamity was *always* there at night. Even in Newcago it had pierced the darkness, glaring at us.

I climbed to my feet, staring upward, trying to find it. And as I stood, everything around me fuzzed.

I found myself in our hideout again, near Megan, who was shaking me. "David? Oh, sparks, *David*!"

"I'm fine," I said, trying to take it all in. Yes, I was back, right where I'd been standing when I'd fallen. The wall was no longer transparent. "What happened?"

"I sent you through by accident," Megan said. "You vanished completely, until you popped back out. Sparks!"

"Interesting."

"Terrifying," she said. "Who knows what you might have found on the other side, David? What if I'd dropped you into a world where the atmosphere was different, and you suffocated?"

"It was like our world," I said, rubbing my side and looking around. "Ildithia was there, except in the distance."

"What…really?" she asked. "Are you sure? I specifically picked a world where this region was empty, so I'd have a good view."

I settled down. "Yeah. Can you reach out to the same world again, on purpose?"

"I don't know," she said. "The things I do, they just kind of *happen.* Like bending your elbow."

"Or eating a bagel," I said, nodding.

"Not…actually like that, but whatever." She hesitated, then settled down on the floor beside me. A moment later, Cody peeked in on us—apparently she'd been too loud when she'd cried out to me. Megan's veil of dark fog had vanished, and he could see us.

"Everything all right?" he asked, rifle in hand.

"Depends on your definition," Megan said, lying back on the floor. "David convinced me to do something stupid."

"He's good at that," Cody said, leaning against the doorframe.

"We're testing her powers," I said to Cody.

"Ach," he said. "And y'all didn't warn me first?"

"What would you have done?" I asked.

"Gotten up and eaten some haggis," Cody said. "Always nice to have a good haggis before someone accidentally destroys your hideout in a burst of unexpected Epic power."

I frowned. “What’s haggis?”

“Don’t ask,” Megan said. “He’s just being silly.”

“I can show him,” Cody said, thumbing over his shoulder.

“Wait,” Megan said. “You actually have some?”

“Yeah. Found it in the market the other day. Guess they believe in using the whole animal round here, eh?” He paused. “The stuff’s *nasty,* of course.”

Megan frowned. “Isn’t it like a Scottish national dish or something?”

“Sure, sure,” Cody said, sauntering into the room. “Being nasty is what *makes* it Scottish. Only the bravest of men dare eat it. Proves you’re a warrior. Like wearing a kilt on a cold, windy day.” He settled down with us. “So what’s up with the powers?”

“Megan sent me into an alternate dimension,” I said.

“Neat,” Cody said, digging in his pocket and pulling out a chocolate bar. “You didn’t bring me a mutant bunny or something, did ya?”

“No mutant bunnies,” I said. “But Calamity wasn’t there.”

“Now that’s even *stranger,*” Cody said, taking a bite of the chocolate bar. He grimaced.

“What?” I asked.

“Tastes like dirt, lad,” he said. “I miss the old days.”

“Megan,” I said, “can you bring up an image of that world again?”

She looked at me, skeptical. “You want to keep going?”

“By the measuring stick of Epic powers,” I said, “this doesn’t seem *too* dangerous. I mean, you dropped me into another world, but I popped back in under a minute.”

“And if that’s a result of lack of practice?” Megan asked. “What if, in doing it more, it gets more dangerous?”

“Then that means you’re learning to affect things more permanently,” I said. “Which is going to be a huge advantage to us. It’s worth the risk.”

She drew her lips to a line, but seemed persuaded. Maybe I *was* a little too good at getting people to do stupid things. Prof had accused me of that on more than one occasion.

Megan waved at the wall she’d changed before, and it vanished, once again providing the view of an empty plain of grass.

“Now the other side,” I said, pointing at the wall with the doorway Cody had come through.

“That’s dangerous,” she warned. “Trapping us between two shadows means that the other dimension is more likely to bleed into…But you don’t care, do you? All right. You owe me a back rub for this, by the way.”

The opposite wall vanished, and it now seemed like the three of us were in a solitary building on the plains, with two walls cut out. The new perspective gave us a view of what I’d seen before: Ildithia in the distance.

“Huh,” Cody said, standing up. He unslung his rifle and used the scope to inspect the city.

“The city is in a different place in this dimension,” Megan said. “Not surprising. It’s easier to view dimensions that are similar to ours, so I should have guessed.”

“Nah, that’s not it,” Cody said. “Ildithia is in the same place in that dimension. But your window isn’t opening where our hideout would be there.”

“What?” Megan said, standing up.

“See those fields? Those are the eastern side of Ildithia, marked by that stand of trees. Same as in our dimension. The city’s in the same place; we’re merely looking at it from the outside.”

Megan seemed troubled.

“What’s the problem?” I asked her.

“I always assumed that my shadows had a direct location connection,” she said. “That if I pulled something through, it was because that was what was happening in another dimension, right where I was.”

“We’re talking about altering the shape of reality,” Cody said with a shrug. “Why should location matter, lass?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It just…it’s not what I’ve always thought. It makes me wonder how much I’ve been wrong about.”

“No Calamity,” I said, walking as close to the invisible wall as I dared. “Megan, what if the shadows you grab are always from the *same* world, a parallel one to ours? I keep seeing Firefight during moments when you use your powers. That seems to indicate that the shadows you’re pulling are always from his world.”

“Yeah,” she said, “that or there are hundreds upon hundreds of different versions of him, and each world has one.”

Cody grunted. “This sounds like a headache.”

“You have no idea,” Megan said. She sighed. “I’ve done things that your theory can’t explain, David. Though perhaps there *is* one similar parallel world that I reach into most often—but if my powers can’t find what I need there, they reach farther. And right after I reincarnate, they go anywhere, do anything.”

I stared at that distant Ildithia for as long as Megan kept the shadow active. A world parallel to our own, a world without Calamity. What would it be like? How were there still Epics, if there was no Calamity to give them powers?

Eventually Megan let the images vanish, and I gave her a neck rub to try to deal with the headache all of this had given her. She kept glancing at the candle, but didn’t reach for it. Before long, all three of us returned to our beds. We needed sleep.

Tomorrow we would dig into Tia’s plan and try to figure out how to save her.

PART THREE

24

I rubbed my hand along the saltstone shelf, disconcerted to find that my fingers left gouges. I dusted my hand off, sprinkling pink sand to the floor. As I stood there, the shelf on the wall *split* in the middle, crumbling away. Salt ran down like sand through an hourglass.

"Uh, Abraham?" I said as he passed.

"We have a day left before we need to leave, David," he said.

"Our hideout is *literally* disintegrating."

"Accessories and ornaments crumble first," he said, ducking into our third-floor spare bedroom—the place where Megan and I had experimented with her powers the night before. "The floors and walls will hold for a time yet."

I didn't find this very comforting. "We'll still have to move soon. Find a new hideout."

"Cody's been working on that. He says he has a few options to talk to you about later today."

"What about the caverns?" I asked. "Under the land the city is passing over? The ones made by Digzone? We could hide there."

"Perhaps," Abraham said.

I followed Abraham into the room, where Cody was whistling and sweeping salt into a pile. Apparently the saltstone we'd grown disintegrated at the same rate as the stone around it. Soon this entire region would collapse, and the salt would vanish.

Morning light shone through the thinning saltstone roof above. I settled

in on a stool, one of the ones Cody had purchased during a scrounging mission. It was strange to be in a city where there wasn't trash to pick through; Ildithia just moved away, leaving behind anything people discarded. It left a sparseness I hadn't seen in Newcago or Babilar.

Megan came in but didn't sit. She leaned against the wall, arms folded, wearing her jacket and jeans. Abraham knelt by the wall, fiddling with the imager, which he'd calibrated earlier. Cody lifted his old broom and shook his head. "Ya know, I think I might be making more salt than I'm cleaning up." He sighed, walking over and settling down on a stool beside me.

Finally Mizzy entered, bearing one of the team's rugged laptops. She tossed a data chip to Abraham, who plugged it into the imager.

"This isn't going to be pretty, guys," Mizzy noted.

"Cody is on the team," Abraham said. "We are accustomed to things that are not pretty."

Cody tossed the broom at him.

Abraham engaged the imager, and the walls and floor went black. A three-dimensional projection of Ildithia appeared on them, but one drawn as a red wireframe. We seemed to be hovering above it.

At one time this had been disorienting to me, but I was used to it now. I leaned forward, peering down through the floor toward the large city. It seemed to be growing and disintegrating at an accelerated rate in this illustration, though the details weren't terribly specific.

"It's a time-lapse computer model from Tia's data," Mizzy said. "I thought it was cool. The city moves at a constant rate, so you can predict what its shape and look will be for any given day. Apparently whoever controls the city can steer it using a big wheel that grows in one of the buildings downtown."

"What happens if it hits another city?" I asked, uncomfortable. In the time-lapse model, the city looked *alive*—like some kind of crawling creature, buildings shooting up like stretching spines.

"Collisions are messy," Abraham said. "When I scouted here years back, I asked that very question. If Ildithia intersects a city it grows into the cracks, buildings squeezing between buildings, streets covering streets. In times past, people got trapped inside rooms while sleeping and died. But a week later the salt crumbled, and Ildithia moved on basically unaffected."

"Aaanyway," Mizzy said, "this ain't the ugly part, kids. Wait until you see the plan."

"The plan looked well developed when I glanced at it," I said, frowning.

"Oh, it's developed," Mizzy said. "The plan is awesome. But we're never going to pull it off." She turned her hand, using the motion to zoom us down toward the wireframe city. In Newcago this had all been done with cameras, and it had felt like we were flying. Here it seemed more like we were in a simulation, which made it a lot less disorienting.

We stopped near the downtown, which was—in the simulation—currently on the growing edge of the city, fresh and new. A particularly tall building sprang up, cylindrical, like a giant thermos.

"Sharp Tower," Mizzy said. "That's its new name—used to be some fancy hotel in Atlanta. It's where Larcener made his palace, and it's where Prof has set up. Upper floors are occupied by whatever lackeys are most favored at the moment, with the reigning Epic living in the large room near the very, very tippy top."

"They climb all those steps?" I asked. "Prof can fly. Do the rest take the stairs?"

"Elevators," Mizzy said.

"Made of *salt*?" I asked, looking up.

"They swap in a metal one and use new cables—salt ones don't work, go figure—and bring in a motor. The shafts are perfectly reasonable though."

I frowned. Still seemed like a lot of work, especially since you had to redo it each week. Though a little slave labor and heavy lifting for their minions was hardly a bother.

"Tia's plan," Mizzy said, "is pretty good. Her goal was to kill Prof, but she had decided she needed more intel before trying that. So the first part of her plan includes a detailed plot for infiltrating Sharp Tower. Tia intended to raid Prof's computers to figure out what he was up to in the city."

"But we," I said, "can use that same plan to rescue Tia instead of raiding his computers."

"Yup," Mizzy said. "Judging by the signal from the broken mobile, Tia's been stashed near the top of this building, on the seventieth floor. She's in some kind of old hotel room. It's a nice suite, judging by the maps. I'd have expected something more prisonlike."

"She said Prof would at first try to persuade her he was rational," I said, feeling cold. "Once she refuses to give him the information he asks for, he'll grow impatient. That's when things will start going badly."

“So what is this plan?” Megan said. She was still leaning against the wall, which was obscured by the imager’s blackness. We hovered, looking up at the red lines of Sharp Tower. A stupid name, since it was basically round and had a flat top.

“Right,” Mizzy said. “Two teams will run the mission. First one will infiltrate a party at the top of the building. Larcener let one of the town’s most important people—an Epic named Loophole—throw parties in Sharp Tower. Prof hasn’t stopped the tradition.”

“Infiltrate?” Abraham asked. “How?”

“Heads of important communities in the city get an invitation to Loophole’s parties in exchange for sending specialist workers to help throw the shindig,” Mizzy explained. “Tia planned to join with members of the Stingray Clan who were already attending.”

“That’s…going to be tough,” Abraham said. “Will we be able to do the same? We don’t have the trust of any of the clans.”

“It gets worse,” Mizzy said pleasantly. “Watch.”

“Watch?” Cody asked.

“There are *animations,*” Mizzy said. A group of people—represented by bouncing stick figures—hopped along the road and joined a larger group thronging the tower. The two “teams” were represented in blue. One group bounced their way into the elevators at the rear. Another team slipped in through a back door and entered a different elevator shaft. They somehow shot up along the shaft, toward the roof.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Wire climbers,” Mizzy said. “Devices you hook to a cable, then ride up by holding on. See, there’s a service elevator, since the *reaaal* important folk need other folk to do stuff for them. And who wants to ride up in the elevator with stinky servants, right? The second team sneaks up that shaft to position themselves on the top residential floor.”

“And we get these wire climbers…how?” I asked.

“No idea,” Mizzy said. “There certainly aren’t any for sale in the city. I think the community that took Tia in must have been planning to buy them somehow.”

I sat tight, seeing what Mizzy meant by “ugly.” When we’d departed the Stingray Clan, Carla and her companions had been very clear in explaining to me that they wouldn’t help rescue Tia. They were too frightened by their close call with Prof, and were determined to get their people out of the city.

Over the next week, they'd covertly pull out of Ildithia and run.

"That's not the whole of it," Mizzy said. "To pull off Tia's mission, we'd need a whole ton of other stuff. Advanced hacking devices, parachutes, kitchen mixers…"

"Really?" Cody asked.

"Yup."

"Sweet," he said, settling back.

It didn't seem sweet to me. I watched the plan play out, as animated by the little bouncing figures. Two teams, operating independently to distract, infiltrate, and steal—all without Prof knowing what had happened. It *was* a good plan, and we could use it to get to Tia instead of the computers.

It was also impossible.

"It would take months to gather this equipment," Abraham said as we watched figures parachuting off the building. "Assuming we could pay for it."

"Yeah," Mizzy said, arms folded. "Warned ya. We're going to have to come up with something else—and we have less time and fewer resources. Which sucks."

The simulation of stick figures ended, and the building hovering in front of us eventually reached the edge of Ildithia and disintegrated, melting away like a lonely ice cream sundae with nobody to eat it.

We don't have time to come up with something better, I thought, glancing at the list of required and suggested supplies that hovered in the air nearby. *Or even something worse.*

I stood and walked from the room.

Megan was first to chase after me, and she caught up quickly. "David?" she asked, then scowled as she saw that her jacket was covered in salt from leaning against the wall. She brushed it off as we headed down the steps to the second floor.

The others followed as well. I didn't speak, leading the group to the first floor. Here, we could hear voices from the buildings next to us. Our neighbors were moving out in preparation for their homes falling apart.

I turned and walked into Larcener's room, where the Epic was sitting wrapped in blankets, though it wasn't that cold, in a chair beside a fireplace —which he hadn't lit.

I needed to play this cool, careful, like a true leader.

I flopped down on one of Larcener's couches. "Well, it's over. We're totally screwed. Sorry, great one. We failed you."

"What are you babbling about?" he demanded, perking up in his blankets.

"Prof captured a member of our team," I said. "He's probably torturing her right now. He'll soon know anything he wants about us. We'll all be dead by the end of the day."

"Idiot!" Larcener said, standing up.

The rest of the team gathered outside the room.

"You might want to simply kill us yourself," I said to Larcener. "So that you get the satisfaction, instead of Prof."

Megan gave me a *What are you doing, you slontze?* look. I was pretty used to that one.

"How did this happen?" Larcener demanded, pacing. "Aren't you supposed to be skilled, efficient? Adept! I see that you're as utterly incapable as I'd guessed all along!"

"Yup," I said.

"I will be alone in the city," he continued. "Nobody else would dare stand against a High Epic. You've *thoroughly inconvenienced* me, human."

To an Epic, that was a major insult.

"I'm sorry, my lord," I said. "But there's nothing we can do now."

"What, you aren't going to even *try* to kill your friend?"

"Well, there's a plan that…" I trailed off. "Kill?"

"Yes, yes. Murder her, so she can't speak. The rational course."

"Oh, right." I swallowed. "Well, we've got this plan, and it's a good one, but we'll never make it work. It requires all kinds of things we don't have. Parachutes. Mannequins. Technology." I made a good show of it. "Of course, if someone could *make* that stuff for us…"

Larcener spun on me, and his eyes narrowed.

I smiled innocently.

"Impudent peon," he muttered.

"All you Epics use language like that," I said. "Do you take some kind of evil dictator language course or something? I mean, who *talks* like—"

"This is a ploy to get me to be your servant," Larcener interrupted, stepping over to me. "I expressly told you that I would *not* use my powers to

serve you."

I stood up, meeting his eyes. "Tia, a member of our team, has been captured by Prof. We have a plan to save her, but without resources we won't be able to make it work. Either you summon the objects we need, or we'll have to pull out of the city and abandon this cause."

"I do *not* get involved," Larcener said.

"You're already involved, bub. You can start working as a member of this team, or you're out. Good luck surviving in the city. Prof has every thug and two-bit Epic here searching for you. Random stops on the streets with a dowser, huge bounties, your likeness being distributed…"

Larcener clenched his jaw. "I thought I was supposed to be the evil one."

"No. You beat the darkness somehow. You're not evil; you're just spoiled and selfish." I nodded toward the others. "We'll bring you a list. It should all be within your powers. You can make…what, anything up to about the size of a couch, right? Range of three miles, if I recall. Maximum mass limit shouldn't be an issue."

"How…" He focused on me, as if seeing me for the first time. "How do you know *that*?"

"You got your conjuration powers from Brainstorm. I had a whole file on her." I walked toward the doorway.

"You're right about one thing," Larcener said after me. "I'm not evil. I'm the only one. Everyone else in this filthy, horrible, *insane* world is broken. Evil, sinful, revolting…whatever you want to call it. *Broken.*"

I looked over my shoulder, meeting his eyes again. In those eyes, I swear I saw it. The darkness, like an infinite pool. Seething hatred, disdain, overwhelming lust for destruction.

I was wrong. He hadn't overcome it. He was still one of them. Something else held him back.

Disturbed, I turned and left the room. I told myself I needed to get him a list as soon as possible, but the truth was that I couldn't look into those eyes any longer. And I wanted to be as far from them as I could get.

25

"WELL, yes," Edmund said over my mobile, "as I think about it, something like that *did* happen to me."

"Tell me," I said, eager. I wore the mobile stuck to my jacket on the shoulder, earpiece in my ear, as I put together things for the mission tonight. I was alone in a room of our new, interim hideout. It had been five days since Tia's capture, and we'd moved as planned. I'd talked to Cody about using the caverns under the city, but we'd eventually decided they hadn't been explored well enough and might be unstable.

Instead, we'd used one of his suggestions, a hidden location under a park bridge. As eager as I was to get to Tia, we hadn't been able to move immediately. We'd needed the time to set up somewhere new and practice. Beyond that, Tia's plan required a party to be happening at Sharp Tower, and the soonest one was tonight. We had to hope that Tia had been able to hold out.

"It must have been…oh, two, three years ago now," Edmund said. "Steelheart was told by my previous masters that dogs were my weakness. He would occasionally lock me up with them. Not for any specific punishment though. I never could figure it out. It seemed random."

"He wanted you to be afraid of him," I said, going through the contents of a pack and checking it against my list. "You're so even-keeled, Edmund. Sometimes you don't seem afraid of anything. You probably worried him."

"Oh, I'm afraid," he said. "I'm an ant among giants, David! I'm *hardly* a threat."

That wouldn't have mattered to Steelheart. He'd kept Newcago in

perpetual gloom and darkness, all to make certain that his people lived in fear. Paranoia had been his middle name. Except he'd had only one name—Steelheart—so Paranoia had been more like a last name for him.

"Well," Edmund continued over the line, "he'd lock me in with dogs. Angry, terrible ones. I'd huddle against the wall and weep. It never seemed to get better, maybe even worse."

"You were afraid of them."

"Why wouldn't I be?" he said. "They negated my powers. They ruined me, turned me into a common man."

I frowned, zipping up the backpack and then taking off my mobile so I could look at the screen and see Edmund, an older man with brown skin and a faint Indian accent.

"You gave away your powers anyway, Edmund," I said. "You're a gifter. Why would being powerless bother you?"

"Ah, but my value to others has let me live in luxury and relative peace, while other men starve and scramble for life. My powers make me important, David. Losing them terrified me."

"Dogs terrified you, Edmund."

"That's what I just said."

"Yes, but you might have the cause wrong. What if you weren't afraid of dogs because they negated your powers; what if they negated your powers because you were afraid of them?"

He looked away from me.

"Nightmares?" I asked.

He nodded. I couldn't see much of the room he was in; a safehouse outside Newcago, one Prof didn't know about. We hadn't been able to contact Edmund until Knighthawk had delivered him a new mobile, via drone. He'd turned the old one off at our request, and had neglected to ever turn it on again. He'd claimed he was merely being careful, in case our attack on the Foundry had gone wrong. Another one of his little rebellions.

"Nightmares," he said, still looking away from the screen. "Being hunted. Teeth gnashing, rending, ripping…"

I gave him a moment and turned back to my work. As I knelt to the side, something slipped out of my T-shirt at the top. My pendant, the one Abraham had given me, marked with a stylized S shape. The sign of the Faithful, those who believed good Epics would come.

I wore it now. After all, I *did* have faith in the Epics. Kind of. I tucked it into my shirt. Three packs checked over; two left. Even Cody, who would run ops on this mission, needed an emergency pack in case things went wrong. Our new hideout—a hastily constructed set of three rooms beneath the bridge in a rarely traveled park—wasn't as secure as our other one, and we didn't want to leave much behind.

I needed to finish this, but I wanted to be able to see Edmund, not just hear him. This was an important conversation. I thought for a moment, then spotted one of Cody's camo baseball caps sitting atop a stack of supplies we'd carted from the previous hideout.

I smiled, grabbed some duct tape, and hung my mobile from the front of the bill—it took about half a roll of the tape, but whatever. When I put the cap on, the mobile hung down in front of me like a HUD on a helmet. Well, a very sloppy HUD. Either way, it meant I could see Edmund while keeping both hands free.

"What are you doing?" he asked, frowning.

"Nothing," I said, getting back to work, mobile dangling near my face. "What happened with the dogs, Edmund? The day things changed. The day you faced them down."

"It's silly."

"Tell me anyway."

He seemed to weigh the situation. He didn't have to obey, not with all of us so distant.

"Please, Edmund," I said.

He shrugged. "One of the dogs went for a little girl. Someone opened the doors to let me out, and…well, I knew her. She was a child of one of my guards. So when one of the beasts lunged for her, I tackled it." He blushed. "It was her dog. It didn't want to attack her. It was just excited to see its master."

"You faced your fear," I said, digging into the next pack, comparing its items to my list. "You confronted the thing that terrified you."

"I guess that's one possibility," he said. "Things did change after that. These days, being around dogs still dampens my powers, but it doesn't completely negate them. I assumed I'd been wrong all along—I thought maybe my weakness was actually pet dander or something like that. I couldn't experiment though, without alerting everyone to what I was doing."

Would that happen to Megan too? Over time, would fire stop negating

her powers? Her weakness still worked on her, but she could make the darkness retreat. Perhaps what Edmund experienced was the next stage.

I zipped up the pack and set it with the others beside the wall.

"Tell me," Edmund said. "Why is it that, if dogs are my weakness, devices with power cells charged by my abilities don't fail when they're around dogs?"

"Hmm?" I said, distracted. "Oh, the Large Dispersal Rule."

"What?"

"An Epic's weakness has less and less influence on their powers the farther you get from the Epic's presence," I said, zipping up the fourth pack. "Like in Newcago—if Steelheart's powers had been negated in all places where someone didn't fear him, then he wouldn't have been able to turn the whole city to steel. Most of the people in the city didn't know who he was, and couldn't fear him. There would have been pockets of non-steel all over the place."

"Ah…," Edmund said.

I stood up, setting the pack with the others. This hat was not working as well as I wanted it to—it was too front-heavy, and kept slipping down.

Needs ballast, I decided. I grabbed the duct tape and used what was left to attach a canteen to the back of the cap. *Much better.*

"Are you…all right?" Edmund asked.

"Yup. Thanks for the information."

"You can repay me," he said, "by agreeing to give me to another master."

I stopped in place, the empty cardboard roll from the duct tape in my hand. "I thought you liked helping us."

"You've grown weak." He shrugged. "You can't protect me any longer, David. I'm tired of hiding in this little room; I'd rather serve a High Epic who can make sure I'm cared for. I hear Night's Sorrow is still dominant."

I felt sick. "You can go free, Edmund. I won't stop you."

"And risk being murdered?" He gave me a thin-lipped smile. "It's dangerous out there."

"You've escaped the darkness, Edmund," I said. "You stumbled on the secret before anyone else. If you don't want to run off, why not come join us? Be a member of the team?"

He picked up a book, turning away from the screen. “No offense, David, but that sounds like an awful ruckus. I’ll pass.”

I sighed. “We’ll send you another supply drop,” I said. “Knighthawk might want you to charge some power cells for him though.”

“Whatever I am commanded to do,” Edmund said. “But David, I do think you’re wrong about one aspect of the powers. You claim my fear of dogs created my weakness originally, but before Calamity, I wasn’t so afraid of them. I didn’t *like* them, mind you. Might even have hated them. But this fear? It seemed to bloom alongside my powers. It’s like the powers…*needed* something to be afraid of.”

“Like water,” I whispered.

“Hmm?”

“Nothing.” That was silly. Calamity couldn’t have been watching me then. “Thanks again.”

He nodded to me, then switched off the mobile. I knelt down and went over the contents of the last pack, then set it with the others. Right as I was doing so, Megan peeked in on me. She hesitated in the doorway, looking at me with a befuddled expression, mouth half open, as if she’d forgotten what she was going to say.

The hat, I realized. Pull it off or play it cool? I decided to play it halfway, and reached up to yank my mobile out of the duct tape but left the hat on. I calmly strapped the mobile to my arm. “Yes?” I asked, ignoring the metric ton of silvery refuse hanging at eye level.

The hat slipped backward, now too heavy in the rear because of the canteen. I caught it and yanked it into place.

Yup. Smooth.

“I’m not even going to ask,” she said. “You done in here?”

“Just finished the last one. Had a nice chat with Edmund too. His experiences match yours.”

“So there’s no getting rid of the weakness for good.”

“Well, the potency of his weakness seems to have decreased over time.”

“That’s something, at least. We’re ready out here.”

“Good.” I stood, gathering up the packs.

“You’re…not going to wear the hat on the mission, are you?”

I casually removed the hat—though I had to yank it hard, as the tape was stuck to my hair—then took a drink from the canteen. With the hat still

attached to it.

I put the hat back on and tugged it into place. “Just testing some ideas.”

So smooooth.

She rolled her eyes as she left. I tossed the hat aside as soon as she was gone, then carted the packs out.

The team was gathered in the main room, lit by glowing mobiles in the waning light. This base had only one story. On either side of the large, round main room was a smaller room. Mizzy and Abraham wore our stealth suits, sleek and form-fitting, with heat sinks at the waists and goggled hoods that could be pulled up and over their faces.

“Team Hip, ready to go,” Mizzy said as I handed her and Abraham their backpacks, which were the heaviest.

“What happened to ‘Team One’?” I asked.

“Obviously not hip enough,” she said. “I considered ‘Team Black’ instead, but figured that was like, kinda racist or something.”

“Isn’t it all right if you call *yourselves* black though?” Megan asked, leaning against the wall, arms folded. “Since you’re both African American?”

“Canadian,” Abraham corrected.

“Yeaaah,” Mizzy said. “Maybe it’s okay if I pick the name? Honestly, I can never remember. Pre-Calamity folks cared a lot about race. Like, it’s good to remember that not everything sucks worse now than it did then. Some stuff sucked in those days too. It’s like, without the Epics, everyone had to find other things to argue about. Race, nationality…oh, and sports teams. Seriously. If you go back in time, do *not* bring up sports teams.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” I said, handing Cody his pack. I wished the things she mentioned were confined to the past, but the way Ildithians seemed to have segregated themselves indicated that even with the Epics, we were still perfectly capable of arguing about race.

Cody took his pack. He was wearing camo, his sniper rifle over his shoulder, and Herman—the crystal grower—attached to his belt. He would use it to create a hiding place out of salt for running ops from the top of a building near Sharp Tower. With the rifle, he might be able to give us some emergency cover.

I’d suggested myself as ops, but Mizzy and Abraham would need someone on ops who could dig into files and schematics and coach them on technological details. That left me on Megan’s team, which I wasn’t

complaining about. We would be sneaking into the party, though we'd had to alter Tia's plan, picking one of her backup options as our method of getting in.

I handed Megan her pack. "Everyone ready?"

"Ready as we can be," Abraham said, "with less than a week to practice."

"What about me?" a voice asked. We turned to find Larcener standing in the doorway to the hideout's last room. He'd decorated it in his preferred fashion, though with fewer sofas. Some of the mass he could use in manifesting objects was dedicated to maintaining the tools he'd made for the team.

"You want to come?" I asked, surprised.

He glared at me. "What if someone shows up here while you're gone?" he said. "You're abandoning me."

"Sparks," I said. "You're worse than Edmund. If someone shows up, project yourself into a decoy and lead them away. That's one of your powers, right?"

"It's painful," he said, folding his arms. "I don't like doing it."

"Oh for the…" I shook my head, turning to the rest of the team. "Let's do this."

26

SHARP Tower rose, a dark form in the night save for the top floors, which glowed from the inside. The salt was a dusty grey in this area, so that the top floors seemed somehow both light and dark at once. Like a black hole wearing a silly birthday hat.

Megan and I approached, packs slung over our shoulders, wearing new faces courtesy of another dimension. This sort of little illusion was easy for her, and she could maintain it indefinitely so long as I didn't stray too far from her. I couldn't help trying to work out the mechanics of it. Were these the faces of some random people? Or were they people who, in their dimension, were going the same place we were?

A large number of people gathered on the ground floor of the building. The old windows, made of thinner salt, had a warm glow to them, and several doors had been opened up to let the elite gather. I stopped, watching another group arrive, conveyed in bicycle rickshaws.

They were dressed like people in Newcago: short, sparkling 1920s-style dresses and bright lipstick on the women; pinstriped suits and sharp hats, like in old movies, on the men. I half expected them to be carrying tommy guns in violin cases. Instead, their bodyguards were armed with Glocks and P30s.

"Darren?" Megan asked, using my fake name.

"Sorry," I said, breaking out of my thoughts. "Reminds me of Newcago." Memories of my youth carried a lot of baggage.

The guests were being entertained on the ground floor while they waited for their turn in the elevator up to the party. Music poured out of the lobby, the type Mizzy would have liked: lots of thumping and rattling. It seemed at

odds with the elegant formalwear. Martinis and caviar were being passed around, more signs of favor and power.

I'd never even tasted a martini. For years I'd assumed it was a brand of car.

Together, Megan and I took a sharp right outside and rounded the building toward a smaller door at the back. Instead of trying to fake our way up the elevator with the rich people, we'd decided to try an avenue where we'd be under far less scrutiny. Tia's plan had included a backup option of sending Team Two up with the servants.

With the images in Tia's notes, we'd been able to fake an invitation here—and a quick check with the Stingray Clan verified that they weren't going to be sending anyone to this party. They'd be expected, but were too busy with their preparations to leave the city.

That left a hole we would hopefully be able to wiggle through. Around the rear of the tower, we found a less privileged class of people gathering to be carted up a smaller service elevator.

"Ready?" I said.

"Ready," Megan said. Her voice was echoed by those of Mizzy and Abraham, who spoke over my earpiece—I had it tucked up under the illusory hair Megan had granted me. Knighthawk was confident our lines would be secure; Prof had bugged our phones in Babilar, but he'd needed to physically place those bugs in the actual handsets, and we'd replaced that equipment.

"Engaging," I said.

Megan and I started running. We jogged up to the crews working the back door and pulled to a stop, struggling to catch our breath as if exhausted.

"Who are you two?" the guard demanded.

"Cake decorators," Megan said, proffering the invitation—which for workers like us was more an order to appear. "Stingray Clan."

"About time," the guard growled. "Get searched and I'll put you on the next load up."

Loophole loved fancy cupcakes. The Stingrays always sent a pair of cake decorators, even when they didn't send Carla or other important people to attend the party.

My heart was thumping as we stepped over and relinquished our backpacks. A stern woman began unzipping pockets.

"Step one, pass," Megan said quietly into the line as the guard pulled out our electric mixers and placed them on the table with a thump. Various

cake-decorating paraphernalia followed. I didn't even know the names of most of the stuff, let alone how it was used. All of this had taught me one thing: cake decorating was *serious* business.

After a quick frisk, we repacked and were ushered ahead of other workers into a dark, salt-walled room with an elevator shaft. The shaft didn't have doors, which seemed terribly unsafe.

"We're in too," Abraham said, "one floor up."

They'd snuck up using the rtich—Abraham had created steps out of mercury up to the second floor—then they'd melted their way in through a window using a specialized pressure washer that delivered a small jet of water strong enough to cut stone. They had used it on one of the windows turned to salt.

Megan and I were loaded onto the elevator, which was a small, ramshackle thing lit by a single lightbulb. The two of us were joined by three other workers, servers in white uniforms.

"Go," I whispered.

I thought I felt our elevator shake as Abraham and Mizzy latched on to the cables above. They zipped up the lines, using the devices Larcener had made for us.

A few seconds later, some distant machine started whirring, and we began to rise. The climb was slow and tedious, with nothing to see—most of the levels still had doors on them, indicating the floors weren't used. Mizzy and Abraham would have to slow their climb before each of the upper floors to peek out and make sure nobody was in the hallway beyond.

The elevator quivered and shook, occasionally grinding against the sides of the shaft, gouging out chunks of salt. What if Mizzy's or Abraham's device slipped, and they fell? What if they spotted someone in one of the upper hallways—where the elevator shafts didn't have doors—and were forced to wait while the elevator approached, threatening to push them into the open? I wiped my brow, and my hand came away grimy with salt dust and sweat.

"We're safe," Abraham said into our ears. "No problems. Unhooking on the sixty-eighth floor."

I relaxed with a sigh. It took us another few minutes to pass the open doorway where Mizzy and Abraham had climbed out, but we saw no sign of them. They still had a couple of floors to climb before reaching their target

on the seventieth floor, but Tia's plan indicated this floor would be less likely to be guarded, something Larcener had confirmed.

I let out a prolonged breath as light flooded us from the seventy-first floor. An old restaurant filling the top of the tower, and our target.

We piled out, the servers rushing to join others who were already delivering trays of food to the partygoers. Megan and I carted our packs into the kitchens, where a veritable legion of cooks used hot plates and skillets to prepare dishes. Large lamps had been clipped to parts of the ceiling, bathing the place in sterile white light, and they'd set out plastic over the floor and most of the old countertops. I wondered what they did when they wanted to salt a dish. Scrape some off the wall?

It was all powered by several thick cords that ended in a set of overtaxed power strips. Seriously, there were a ton of them. To plug in something new, you'd have to unplug *two* other cords, which I was pretty sure violated some law of physics.

Megan tried to get information out of a passing server, but was interrupted by a call of "There you are!"

We turned to face a towering chef who had to be nearly seven feet tall. The man stooped as he walked, to not bang his head on an old salt light fixture. His face was so pinched, he looked like he'd been drinking a lemon-juice-and-pickle smoothie.

"Stingrays?" he bellowed.

We nodded.

"New faces. What happened to Suzy? Bah, never mind." He grabbed me by the shoulder, dragging me through the busy room to a smaller pantry on the side where they'd set out ingredients. A helpless-looking woman in a small chef's hat stood here, overlooking a single tray of unfrosted cupcakes. Her eyes wide, she held a small tube of frosting in sweaty hands and regarded the cupcakes as someone might a row full of tiny nuclear warheads, each labeled *Do not bump.*

"Pâtissier is here!" the lurchy chef said. "You're off the hook, Rose."

"Oh, thank heavens," the young woman said, tossing aside the tube of frosting and scrambling away.

The tall chef patted me on the shoulder, then retreated, leaving the two of us in the little pantry.

"Why do I get the feeling there's something they aren't telling us?" Megan said. "That girl was looking at these cupcakes like they were

scorpions."

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Right. Scorpions."

Megan eyed me.

"Or tiny nuclear warheads," I said. "That works too, right? Of course, you could *strap* a scorpion to a nuclear warhead, and that would make it even more dangerous. You'd have to try to disarm the thing, but wow—*scorpion.*"

"Yes, but why?" Megan said, setting her pack on the plastic-topped counter.

"Hmm? Oh, Loophole has executed three different pastry chefs so far for creating substandard desserts. It was in Tia's notes. The woman *really* likes her cupcakes."

"And you didn't mention this because…"

"Not important," I said, getting my own pack out. "We aren't going to be around long enough to deliver any pastries."

"Yes, because our plans *always* go *exactly* as they're supposed to."

"What? Was I supposed to take a crash course in decorating?"

"In fact," Cody said over the line, "I'm not too bad at cake decorating, if you must know."

"I'm sure," Megan said. "You going to tell us about the time when you had to fix cupcakes for the Scottish high king?"

"Don't be silly, lass," Cody drawled. "It was the king of Morocco. Cupcakes are too dainty for a Scotsman. Give him one, and he'll ask why didn't you shoot the wee cake's parents instead and serve that."

I smiled as Megan unhooked the side of her mixer and quietly retrieved the pair of Beretta subcompacts hidden inside, along with a pair of suppressors. Her mixer wouldn't work—its innards had been sacrificed to give us storage. That had seemed a reasonable risk to Tia, since the team doing the searching down below wasn't likely to have access to electricity.

We each screwed a suppressor in place, then tucked our handguns into underarm holsters. I plugged in my mixer, which did work; the loud *wrrr* it put out gave us covering sound. I threw some ingredients into the mixing bowl just in case, then laid out the decorating tools.

Advantageously, our little pantry had its own door into the main room. I moved over to peek out while Megan tore apart her mixer's power adapter and removed a small, boxy device much like a mobile.

I cracked the door to do a quick survey of the party. The kitchens were

in the absolute center of the seventy-first level, which was important, since a portion of the floor outside *rotated.*

A revolving restaurant: one of those strange ideas from pre-Calamity that I sometimes had trouble believing were real. Once upon a time, ordinary people could have come up here for a nice meal while they looked over the city. The tower's pinnacle restaurant was like a wheel, with the hub remaining stationary and the floor rotating in a ring outside. The outer walls were stationary as well. The ceiling rose in places two more floors to the tower's roof; the partial levels above us were now being used only to position lighting.

The transformation into salt had positively ruined the machinery for the floor, particularly the motors and wires. Getting the place rotating again apparently required the effort of a work crew, engineers, and a minor Epic named Helium who had levitation powers. Loophole went through the hassle every week though, to make something special—something that would stand out. A very Epic thing to do.

I spotted the woman herself sitting at one of the tables on the rotating portion. She had a pixie cut and a slender build. A nice complement to the 1920s-style outfit she wore.

The party up here was more subdued than the one on the first floor; no loud music, just a string quartet. People sat at tables draped in white, waiting for food. In other areas, the salt tables and chairs had been moved aside to allow dancing, but nobody was bothering with that. Instead each table was its own little fiefdom, with an Epic holding court, surrounded by sycophants.

I picked out a series of minor Epics, noting which ones were still alive—meaning they'd thrown their lot in with Prof rather than fleeing the city. Stormwind was there, surprisingly: a young Asian woman sitting on a dais. She had obviously weathered her time in Prof's prison and been released. Prof had apparently paraded her around as he had in order to show that *he* was now dominant in Ildithia. But ultimately, he needed her. Without her powers the crops wouldn't grow, and luxuries—and even basic necessities—in the city would dry up.

I shook my head. I couldn't see the entire room from my vantage, as it was shaped like a ring, but Prof wasn't in this half—and I doubted he was in the other half. He wasn't likely to attend a party like this.

"We're in position," Mizzy said softly over the line. "We've made it to the seventieth level."

That was where Tia was being held, and was also where Prof's rooms would be. The two were on opposite sides of the building though, so hopefully we'd have Tia in hand and be gone before he even realized we'd been here. Her original plan had included luring him out of his rooms with a distraction so she could grab his information without him knowing, but we didn't have to worry about that now.

"Roger," Cody said. "Nice work, Team Hip. Wait for David's or Megan's go-ahead before continuing."

"Yeaaah," Mizzy said. "No risk of us doing otherwise. This place is *littered* with security cameras. Infiltration suits won't be enough to get us any farther."

"We'll get ready for step three," I said. "Just let us…"

I trailed off, my jaw dropping as I spotted something out in the main room.

"David?" Cody asked.

Someone had rotated into view, sitting on a salt throne and surrounded by women in tight dresses. A man in a long black coat, with dark hair that tumbled past his shoulders. He sat imperiously, hand resting on the hilt of a sword, which stood point-down beside him like a scepter.

Obliteration. The man who had destroyed Houston and Kansas City and tried to blow up Babilar. The tool that Regalia had used to push Prof into darkness. He was *here*.

He met my eyes and smiled.

27

I ducked back into our pantry room, heart thumping, palms sweating. It was all right. I was wearing a false face. Obliteration wouldn't recognize me. He was just a creepy guy who would give that look to—

Obliteration appeared next to me. Like always with his teleportation, he materialized in a flash of light. Megan cursed, stumbling backward, as Obliteration rested his hand on my shoulder. "Welcome, killer of demons," he said.

"I…" I licked my lips. "Great Epic, I think you have mistaken me for someone else."

"Ah, Steelslayer," he said. "Your features may change, but your eyes—and the hunger within them—are the same. You have come to destroy Limelight. This is natural. 'For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother…' "

Megan's gun clicked as she rested it against the side of Obliteration's head. She didn't shoot. It would draw attention to us, ruining the plan. Besides, he'd simply teleport away before the bullet hit.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"I was invited," Obliteration said, smiling. "Limelight sent for me, and I could not but agree to appear. His calling card was…demanding."

"Calling card…," I said. "Sparks. He has a motivator based on your powers." Knighthawk had said that if you tried to build a device using a living Epic's powers, it would work—but would cause them pain, and draw them to it.

"Yes, he did use one of those…devices to summon me. He must wish

for death, Steelslayer. As we all do, in the depths of our souls."

Sparks. Regalia must have made at least one more bomb from Obliteration's powers—one other than the ones for Babilar and Kansas City. A bomb Prof now had. Prof would have had to charge his with sunlight. I assumed that was what had drawn Obliteration.

That meant that somewhere in this city was a device capable of destroying it in an instant. How terrible would it be if Prof gave up his humanity to protect Babilar, only to inflict the exact same destruction on Ildithia?

Obliteration watched us, relaxed. When we'd parted last, it had been after a long chase in which he'd tried his best to kill me. He didn't seem to bear a grudge, fortunately.

But before we'd parted, I'd been forced to reveal something to him. "You know the secret of the weaknesses," I said.

"Indeed," he answered. "Thank you very much for that. Their dreams betray them, and so my holy work may proceed. I need only discover their fears."

"You mean to rid this world of Epics," Megan said.

"No," I said, holding Obliteration's eyes. "He means to rid this world of *everyone.*"

"Our paths align, Steelslayer," Obliteration said to me. "We will need to face one another eventually, but today you may proceed with your task. God will make of this world a glass, but only after the burning has come…and *we* are his fires."

"*Damn,* you're creepy," Megan said.

He gave her a smile. " 'And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light.' " With that, he vanished. As always, when he teleported away, he left a statuelike image of himself created from glowing white ceramic that shattered a second later, then quickly evaporated.

I sagged against the doorway and Megan caught me by the arm, propping me up. Sparks. As if there weren't enough to worry about already.

"Where are those pastries!" a voice shouted outside. "Move, you slontzes. She's demanding cupcakes."

The tall chef burst into our pantry. Megan spun toward him, tucking her gun behind her back. And suddenly, the pan full of cupcakes from earlier had intricate frosting on the tops.

The tall chef let out a relieved breath. “Thank heavens for that,” he said, grabbing the pan. “Let me know if you two need anything.”

He moved away. I watched, horrified, worried that once it got too far from Megan, the frosting would vanish. She rested her hand on the counter, then slumped, and it was my turn to grab her.

“Megan?” I asked.

“I…think I managed to make those permanent,” she said. “Sparks, that’s more than I’ve done in a long time. I can feel the headache coming on already.” Her skin felt clammy under my fingers, and she’d gone pale.

That said, it was *remarkable.* “Imagine what you could do with more practice!”

“Well, we’ll see.” She paused. “David, I think I found a dimension where you’re not an expert in guns, but in *pastries.*”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” she said, righting herself. “Yet—in all of infinity—I don’t think I’ve ever found a dimension where you can kiss worth a hill of beans.”

“That’s unfair,” I said. “You didn’t complain last night.”

“You stuck your tongue in my ear, David.”

“That’s way romantic. Saw it in a movie once. It’s like…a passionate wet willie.”

“All y’all *do* realize your line is open to me, right?” Cody asked.

“Shut up, Cody,” Megan said, tucking her gun back into its place under her arm. “Warn Abraham and Mizzy we had a run-in with Obliteration. We’re moving on step three now.”

“Roger,” Cody said. “And David…”

“Yeah?”

“Y’all ever stick your tongue in *my* ear, and I’ll shoot ya in yer bagpipes.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I said, then proceeded to undress.

I was wearing slacks under my bulky jeans and a button-up shirt underneath my jacket. Megan tossed me her jacket; I pulled out the lining, which reversed the jacket into a tuxedo coat.

Her sweater came off next, revealing the gown she had bunched up around her waist. Off came her trousers—she wore tight biker shorts beneath—and then she yanked down the gown’s skirt, covering her legs.

I tried not to gawk. Or, well, I tried to gawk covertly. Megan's sleek red gown was all sparkly and gorgeous and…well, it really accented her curves. Like how a nice cheekpiece with shadow lines accents a perfect rifle stock.

Unfortunately, she wasn't wearing her own face. That ruined the effect. But still, that neckline…

I caught her looking at me and blushed. Only then did I realize she didn't seem to have noticed my ogling, but was instead nodding to herself, a faint smile on her lips.

"Are you…staring at my chest?" I asked.

"What?" she said. "Stay focused, Knees."

Awesome, I thought, tossing on my jacket.

"Take this," she said, handing me the small box she'd removed from her mixer's power adapter. "Dresses like this don't have much in the way of storage."

"Don't you usually…" I nodded toward her cleavage.

"I've already got my mobile stuffed in there," she said. "And before you ask, no, there wasn't more room for any mini-grenades. I strapped those to my thigh. A girl's got to be prepared."

Sparks, I love this woman.

I tucked the box into a pocket, and the two of us stepped to the door. Megan concentrated, transforming our features again. I felt a warping as it happened. A blink of another world, another reality. In it, the people we'd been disguised as walked away—a woman with the face Megan had been wearing, and a man with a solemn expression and wide lips.

Gone were the two pastry chefs. What stepped out into the main room was instead a pair of rich dinner guests wearing a different pair of false faces. For a moment there, I'd seen what Megan must when she used her powers—the ripples of time and space that made up our reality.

Megan slipped her arm through mine and we started to stroll through the large disc of a room, on the upper walkway, a portion that didn't rotate. I noted that Obliteration had returned to his throne, a *coconut* in hand, of all things. He'd probably teleported somewhere and fetched one. So far as I'd been able to discover, there was no distance limitation to his teleportation—he simply had to have seen the place, or at least had it described, to get there.

He glanced toward me and nodded. Sparks. He saw through this disguise too? I didn't buy his line about my eyes; he had some kind of power he was keeping hidden. Maybe he was a dowser and could sense Epics.

Though this room was *filled* with Epics. How would he recognize the two of us?

Troubled, I tried to keep my mind on our task.

"Nice work," Cody said in my ear. "Keep it up. A quarter rotation through the room to go."

"Team Hip still good?" I asked.

"Ready and waiting," Cody said.

We continued, passing close to Loophole's table. The lean, short-haired woman was shrinking servers and making them dance on her table for the amusement of her gathered crowd. I'd always wondered…

Megan steered me onward as I started to linger.

"Her powers are awesome," I whispered to her. "She has incredible control of what she can shrink and how she does it."

"Yeah, well, ask for an autograph later," Megan said.

"Um…are you jealous? Because your powers are way better than—"

"Focus, David."

Right. We walked around the room until we approached a small door marked with a restroom sign. It was in the central hub, same as the kitchens. We stepped in, and as Tia's plans indicated, beyond was a small service hallway, with a restroom on either side. Straight ahead was our goal. A nondescript white door, obviously important—the other doors were still salt, heavy and awkward to move. This one was wood, with a silvery doorknob.

I got out a set of lockpicks. "This would be easier if you could swap the door for one that wasn't locked," I said, working on the knob.

"I might be able to do that," she said. "But I don't know if I could make it permanent. Which would mean that you'd enter through the door, step into another dimension, and change things there—then it would all swap back once you stepped out."

"You fixed the cupcakes," I said.

"Yeah," she said softly, looking over her shoulder. "This is new territory for me, David. Always before, if I pushed this far I lost myself. I often ended up dead. It's not a good mix, knowing that you're immortal and having no sense of responsibility. Perfect recklessness."

I got the door unlocked. It was an easy one, nowhere near as difficult as what Abraham and Mizzy would have to deal with. This door wasn't locked to keep out determined interlopers; it was here to prevent the casual passerby

from getting hurt. I swung the door open.

Beyond were a large generator and an engine that turned the floor. Megan and I slipped into the chamber before anyone entered the hallway to use the restrooms, and I took out my mobile for some light. It was cramped, and the floor was coated with powdery salt.

"Sparks," Megan said. "How do they get this all in here? They redo this every week?"

"It's not as tough as it sounds," I said. "Loophole shrinks all this and carries it up in her pocket. She then shrinks some workers and sends them into the walls and floor with drills to place the wires she needs. With Helium levitating the floor just enough to keep it from grinding, they can get it spinning again."

I knelt beside the machinery, picking out the engine. It was connected to some wires and metal gears below.

"That's the power cell," Megan said, pointing at one part of the machine, "with a backup diesel generator."

"We didn't plan on a backup," I said. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Nah," she said, holding out her hand. I placed the box from earlier into it. "We're fooling with the cords, not the generator itself. We should be good."

I held out my mobile, the instructions for clipping on the device pulled up. I held this for her as she attached our little box to the proper wires. When we stepped back, I could barely tell it was there.

"Step three complete," I announced, satisfied. "We're pulling out of the generator room."

"Roger," Cody said. "Tapping Abraham and Mizzy into the main line. Be ready, you two. Let Megan and David extract, and we'll move to step four."

"Roger," Abraham said.

"Groovy," Mizzy said.

"There's that word again," I said, pushing out into the restroom hallway. "I tried looking it up. Something to do with record grooves? It—"

I broke off, suddenly face to face with a serving girl leaving one of the restrooms. She gaped at me, and then at Megan. "What are you two doing here?" she asked.

Calamity! "We were looking for the restrooms," I said.

“But they’re right—”

“Those are the *peasant* restrooms,” Megan said from behind. I stumbled out of her way as she strode past me. “You expect me to use the facilities of the common *servants*?”

Megan wore the mantle of an Epic like it had been designed with her in mind. She stood up taller, eyes wide, and *flames* began to flicker in the hallway.

“I didn’t—” the server began.

“You question me?” Megan demanded. “You *dare*?”

The server shrank down, lowering her eyes, and fell silent.

“Better,” Megan said. “Where might I find the proper rooms?”

“These are the only ones that are maintained. I’m sorry! I can—”

“No. I’ve had enough of you. Away, and be glad I don’t want to upset our great lord by leaving a body for him to deal with.”

The woman scampered out into the main party room.

I cocked an eyebrow at Megan as the flames faded. “Nice.”

“It was too easy,” she said. “I’ve been abusing my powers. Let’s get Tia and pull out.”

I nodded, leading the way back into the restaurant proper. “We’re out,” I said as the two of us stepped down onto the rotating floor. I couldn’t sense anything; it was moving too slowly to be noticeable. We took up position near a table, doing our best to look as innocuous as possible.

“In position,” Abraham said. “On your mark.”

“Cody?” I said.

“All looks good. Proceed.”

“Give us a count of three,” Abraham said.

I took a deep breath and pressed the mobile in my pocket, activating the device attached to the generator. Any of us could do it, as it was connected to all of our mobiles, but we’d decided that Megan and I should be in charge of it. It would be easier for Mizzy and Abraham to vocalize what they wanted than to get out their mobiles, risk the light involved, and activate the device on their own.

As soon as I pushed the button, the lights flickered off and the revolving restaurant ground to a stop. Voices murmured and dishes clattered as I counted to three, then removed my finger.

The lights came back on, and the machinery whirred to life. We started to move again. Nervous, I watched for a sign of alarm.

None came. Apparently one of the difficulties in working with machinery that had been hacked together a day ago was that breakages and brownouts were common. Tia's plan made use of this.

"Perfect!" Abraham said. "We're past the first bank of cameras."

"No alarm on any radio frequency I can find," Cody said. "Only some security guards grumbling and hoping Prof doesn't blame them for the brownout. Tia, lass, you're a genius."

"Let's hope you can give her the compliment in person soon," I said to Cody. "Abraham, let us know when your team is at the next camera. We're on a timer now. The chefs are going to start wondering where their pastry makers went, and people are eventually going to go inspect the generators."

"Roger."

Megan and I remained in position. From here on out, the plan was supposed to take under ten minutes. It was tough to wait. Mizzy and Abraham were crawling through guard-infested hallways, while the two of us were supposed to stand up here and look innocent. We'd tried—and failed—to work out a way to get down and meet them, so Megan could use her powers to help with the last portions of the infiltration.

Perhaps that was for the best. Megan was looking haggard, rubbing her forehead, growing testy. I fetched us some drinks from a servant standing near the bar, but then realized that they probably had alcohol in them, which was a very bad idea right now. We needed to be alert. Instead, I grabbed a cupcake off a passing tray. Might as well sample an alternate-dimension David's handiwork.

I stopped halfway to our table. Had I heard…

I turned around, trying to pick the voice out of those chattering in the crowd. Yes. I did know that voice.

Prof was here.

I was mildly surprised; socializing wasn't exactly a Prof thing. Yet that deep voice was unmistakable.

There was ample reason to stay far away from him, but at the same time I was wearing a new face—and our experiences on the first day showed that he was fooled by Megan's illusions. Maybe it would be worth scouting to find out where exactly he was and what he was saying.

"Prof's here," I said over the line.

“Sparks,” Cody said. “You sure?”

“Yes,” I said, moving to where I could see him standing beside one of the windows. “I’m going to approach with care and watch him. If the guards spot Abraham and Mizzy, he’ll be alerted first. Thoughts?”

“I agree,” Megan said over the line. “The two of us aren’t doing anything else useful up here. This could give us important intel.”

“Yes,” Cody said. Then he paused. “But be careful, lad.”

“Sure, sure. I’ll be careful as a diabetic slug in a candy factory.”

“Or, you know,” Megan said, “a slug in Ildithia.”

“That too. You going to back me up?”

“On your tail now, Knees.”

I took a deep breath, then crossed the room toward Prof.

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I slid up to a tall table near where Prof was speaking. A cluster of people surrounded him—lesser Epics, judging by the ones I recognized. Prof had a notepad out, and had settled down at a table.

Others gave the group a wide berth. I leaned on the tall table, trying to look nonchalant. I scratched at my ear, flipping on the directional audio amplification on my earpiece.

"Larcener must be found," Prof said. I could barely pick him up. "Until we accomplish this, we can do nothing."

The others in the group nodded.

"I want Fabergé and Dragdown to spread rumors," Prof said, writing on his notepad. "Claim there is an underground resistance movement against me, and it's looking for a leader. Surveillance is your duty, Inkwell. You'll watch the various powerful family neighborhoods. One of them has to be sheltering him, like the Stingrays were doing for our captive below.

"We attack in two ways: the promise of a rebellion to draw him out, mixed with the threat of discovery. Fuego, I want you to keep working with your dowser, doing sweeps through the city. We'll make a big show of where we're looking and expect Larcener to move—we flush him out like dogs in a field scaring pheasants."

I leaned against my table, suddenly feeling as if I'd been punched in the gut.

Prof had put together a team.

It made sense. Prof had years of practice organizing and leading teams of Reckoners, and he was *very* good at hunting Epics. But hearing him talk to

these people like he'd once talked to us…it was heartbreaking. How easily he'd replaced his friends and freedom fighters with a team of tyrants and murderers.

"We're at the next corner," Abraham whispered through my earpiece. "Tia's maps show hidden cameras here."

"Yeah, I spot 'em," Mizzy said. "Conspicuous pictures hung on the wall, to hide a hollowed-out section of saltstone. Hold this one until we give word."

"Roger," Megan said. "Dimming on Cody's mark."

"Proceed," Cody said.

The lights flickered, dimmed, and went out.

"Again?" Prof demanded.

"Engineers must have messed up the installation," one of the Epics said. "Could be grinding against the old salt gears and machinery."

"Through," Abraham said.

Megan let go of the button and the lights returned. Prof stood up, seeming dissatisfied.

"My lord Limelight," said a young female Epic. "I *can* find Larcener. Just give me leave."

Prof turned to study her, then settled back down in his chair. "You were slow to come to my service."

"Those quick to give allegiance are quick to change it, my lord."

Do I recognize her? "Cody," I whispered, "is there anything in my notes about a female Epic in Ildithia with blonde hair? Wears it in a braid. She may be twenty to twenty-five years old."

"Let me see," Cody said.

"And what would you do," Prof said to the woman, "if you found him?"

"I'd kill him for you, my lord."

Prof snorted. "And in so doing, destroy everything I'm working toward. Fool woman."

She blushed.

Prof reached into his pocket, taking something out and setting it on the table. A small cylindrical device, perhaps the size of an old battery.

I recognized it. I had one in my own pocket; Knighthawk had given it to me. I reached in and felt it, to reassure myself it was still there. A tissue sample incubator.

"You have my leave to hunt him," Prof said, "but if you *do* find him, do not kill him. Get me some of his blood or skin in this. He dies only after I know that the sample is good. If anyone kills him before that, I *will* destroy them."

I shivered.

"You there," he said louder.

I jumped, looking to find that he was pointing *right at me.*

He waved me over. I checked behind me, then looked back at him. He *was* looking at me.

Calamity!

He waved again, more impatiently, expression darkening.

"Guys, this could be bad," I whispered, rounding my table and walking toward Prof.

"What are you doing?" Megan demanded. She'd set up nearby, leaning against a railing and sipping at a drink.

"He called for me."

"We're at Tia's door," Abraham said. "Two guards. We're going to have to engage them."

"Prepare for another blackout," Cody said. "David, what's your status?"

"Crapping my pants," I whispered, then stepped up to Prof's table.

He gave me a brief glance, then pointed at my hand. I frowned and looked down. Only then did I realize that I was still holding the uneaten cupcake. I blinked, then handed it over.

Prof took it, then dismissed me with a wave.

I was all too happy to obey. I scuttled back, then leaned against the table, trying to relax my strained nerves.

"Situation stable," Megan said, sounding relieved. "False alarm. Abraham, you ready?"

"Yes. I'll give a mark."

"Proceed," Cody whispered.

The lights went out again, causing Prof to curse. I closed my eyes. This was the moment. Would Tia be behind those doors?

"We're in," Abraham said. "Both guards are down. Dead, I'm afraid."

I breathed out softly as Megan restored the lights. Two dead guards. Reckoner protocol was to minimize such things, as Prof had always said we

wouldn't get far killing our own. The guards weren't innocent; they implicitly condoned Tia's capture, and likely her torture. But in the end, two normal people—just trying to survive in the new, terrible world—were dead because of us.

Let the prize be worth the cost.

"Tia?" I whispered.

"She's here," Mizzy said. "Abraham's freeing her from her bonds right now. Doesn't look too bad."

A short time later, a familiar female voice spoke over the line. "Huh. You slontzes actually did it."

"How are you?" I asked, sharing a relieved look with Megan.

"He said that some members of his team were 'growing impatient' and had me tied up to think about my answers. But he didn't hurt me." She paused. "There's still a lot of Jon there. I wouldn't have assumed…I mean…"

"I know," I said, turning to watch Prof interact with his Epics, though I wasn't angled right to catch what he was saying.

"I almost believed him, David. Believed that he hadn't turned, that this was all part of some necessary ploy to fight the Epics…"

"He knows what to say," I told her. "He's not fully gone, Tia. We'll get him back."

She didn't reply as Megan and I started toward the elevators. If anyone questioned us, I'd pretend to be feeling ill, and we'd take the next ride down. They wouldn't check us against the guest list down there, like they would have if we'd tried to go up that way.

Easy up, easy down. I almost felt like I'd been slacking through the mission, with Abraham and Mizzy doing the difficult work. "Objective achieved," I said. "Full extraction, everyone."

"You have the data already?" Tia asked.

"Data?" I said.

"From Jon's computers."

"No," I said. "We came for you, not for that."

"And I appreciate it. But David, I've been talking to him, and I got some things out of him. We were right. Regalia left a plan for Jon to follow. He's here at her bidding. Coming to Ildithia, it's part of some kind of master

plan. One we *need* to discover."

"I agree, but…Wait."

Behind me, the room had suddenly hushed. Megan's hand tightened on my arm, and we turned around.

Prof had stood up, quieting everyone around him.

Tia started to object to what I'd said, but I cut her off. "Something's wrong. What did you do?"

"Nothing," Mizzy said. "We just stepped out of Tia's rooms. We're on our way to the elevator shaft."

Prof gestured sharply toward the elevators, saying something I couldn't make out. The urgency in his motions was unmistakable.

"Abraham, Mizzy," I said. "You've been discovered. Repeat, you've been discovered. Get to an exit, *right now*."

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I pushed toward the main guest elevators, but was surprised when Megan held me back. I looked at her, and she in turn nodded toward Prof's team of lackeys. They were moving in the same direction. They'd have priority; we'd be shouted out of the way.

Stairs? Megan mouthed.

I nodded. They were in the hub of the circular chamber, so we began to move in that direction, trying not to look conspicuous. If Abraham's team had been spotted, then it was even more imperative that Megan and I remain hidden.

"Backtracking for emergency escape," Abraham said, breathing heavily. "Those cameras are going to spot us. Even if they've been alerted, I'd rather they not know which hallways we're in."

"Killing the lights," I said. "Move to night vision."

"Roger."

I turned off the lights with the mobile, causing a general outcry in the restaurant.

"What tipped him off?" Mizzy asked.

"He must have planted a bug of some sort on me," Tia said. "One set to trigger if I left my room."

"He could be tracking you!" I said.

"I know," she said. "Little we can do about that right now though."

I felt so helpless. Megan and I sidled up to the room's inner ring, moving toward the stairwell.

"David," Tia said, "Jonathan's chambers are on this level. I'm going to take Abraham and Mizzy and go get that data. We can grab it during the blackout confusion; they'll never expect us to be going that way."

I stopped in place. "Tia, no. Abort. *Get out.*"

"Can't do that."

"Why?" I said. "Tia, you've always been the *careful* one! This mission is going to hell. We need to extract."

"You do realize what's in that data, David."

"Regalia's plans?"

"More than that. She saw Calamity, David. Regalia interacted with him, or her, or whatever it is. Jon boasted to me of what he'd seen. David, there are *pictures.*"

Sparks. Pictures of Calamity? The Epic?

"All the secrets we've been hunting could be on that data drive," Tia said. "The answers we've been chasing all our lives. Surely you, of all people, can see it. My plan got you this far; we need to take the last step. That data is worth the risk."

From this angle I could see through a glass window on the outside rim of the building. Calamity was there, of course. It was always there, heaven's bullet hole. Calamity…an Epic. The ultimate gifter? Would we find answers in that spot of garish light? Would we find out why all this had begun?

The meaning of Epics…the truth?

"No, Tia," I said. "We've been discovered, and my team is in serious danger. We can't grab that data right now. We'll get it later."

"We're *so close,*" she said. "I'm not leaving it, David. I'm sorry. This team is mine, and as the senior Reckoner, I—"

"Senior Reckoner?" Megan cut in. "You abandoned us."

"Says the traitor."

Megan stiffened. She stood beside me, my hand on her shoulder, but I couldn't see much of her. The room was completely black, with partygoers knocking into things, voices raised in confusion. Across the room, an Epic burst into red lightning, giving the place a glow. Soon a second Epic started glowing with a calmer, blue light.

"Tia," I said, trying to be rational, "I'm in command of this mission, and I'm telling you to extract. That information isn't worth risking my team. Abraham, Mizzy, get out of there."

Deathly silence came over the line. I could imagine them one floor down, looking Tia in the eye, considering.

"Roger that, David," Abraham said. "Team Hip extracting."

"I'm with him," Mizzy said. "This isn't the time for a power struggle, Tia. Let's get *out* of here."

Tia muttered something inaudible but made no further argument. Megan tugged on my arm, leading me the last distance toward the door to the stairwell, which we could now make out by the light of several glowing Epics. Unfortunately, with the power out, Prof's team was gathering there as well, and blocked the way.

"David?" Mizzy asked over the line a short time later. "What about you two?"

"Keep on with your emergency extraction plan," I said quietly. "We have false identities. We're safe up here."

"We're ready," Abraham said. "Won't need the inflatables. Regrettably, we have something superior."

"Go," Cody said. "You should be clear."

I thought I heard a window being blown open below, or at least felt the vibrations.

"Parachutes!" someone in our room shouted. "Outside!"

People rushed for the windows; Megan and I backed away. Prof's Epics shoved past us to a window, and then the blonde woman I thought I recognized waved over several guards. She glanced at Prof, who stood with arms folded, lit by the glowing Epics nearby. He nodded.

"Bring them down," the woman said, pointing.

The guards started shooting. The window shattered amid the cacophony of indoor weapons fire. It was like firecrackers, if they'd been stapled to your head and stuffed in your ears.

Muzzles flashed, illuminating the dark room like strobe lights. I winced, backing away as the guards filled Abraham's parachutes with holes. Fortunately, the action at the window had drawn everyone's attention that way. Megan and I were able to retreat toward the stairwell at the center of the room.

"Parachutes down, my lord," the blonde Epic said, turning to Prof.

We didn't have long until they discovered that the chutes were attached to the corpses of the dead guards. Abraham, Mizzy, and Tia would be using

the distraction to reach the elevator doors, then ride their wire climbers down the cables and exit the building.

"We're at the elevators," Abraham said.

"Go!" Cody said.

"Right."

I waited a tense few moments.

"We've hit the second floor," Abraham finally said, out of breath. "Stopping here."

"That was *quuuuiiite* the ride," Mizzy added. "Like a zip line, except straight down."

"At least the wire didn't break on you halfway," I noted.

"What?" Mizzy asked.

"Nothing."

"David," Abraham said, composed again. "There is a problem. Tia didn't come with us."

"She *what*?"

"Tia remained above," Abraham said. "When we jumped into the elevator shaft, she ran the other way."

Toward Prof's room. Calamity's *shadow,* that woman was stubborn. After all the work we'd done, she was going to get herself killed.

"Continue your extraction," I said. "Tia is on her own now. Nothing we can do."

"Roger."

After all the work we'd gone through to get to her, she did *this.* Part of me couldn't blame her; I was tempted by that information too. The rest of me was irate with her for forcing me into this position, where I had to make the call to leave a team member behind.

The lights suddenly came on again.

The ground lurched under the dining tables—Megan and I, near the hub, were on the nonrotating portion. To our left a short, balding Epic from Prof's team approached around the hub, triumphantly raising the dampening device we'd attached to the generator.

Prof looked at it, then shouted, "They're here! Secure both the elevators and the steps. Wiper, sweep the room!"

*Wiper…*That was a name I recognized.

“Oh!” Cody said. “Right, Wiper. I found that Epic for you, David. Sorry, lad. Had it in hand right as everything went to Wales in a handbasket. Wiper. Her powers—”

“—are to disrupt other Epics’ abilities,” I whispered. “Short them out for a second.”

A flash of light pulsed through the room. In that moment, I turned and found Megan looking at me. Not the false face she’d created, but Megan herself. Beautiful though that was, it wasn’t what I’d wanted to see at all.

Our disguises were gone.

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FOR better or worse, my time with the Epics had seriously helped me deal with being surprised. I was almost as quick as Megan was in pulling out my handgun.

Pointedly, while we both moved by instinct, neither of us fired on Prof. Megan gunned down the three armed soldiers who had been firing out the window. Our little popguns acquitted themselves well, for compacts.

I shot Wiper.

She died a lot more easily than most Epics I'd killed—in fact, watching her drop in a spray of blood almost surprised me more than losing our disguises. I'd grown used to Epics being exceptionally tough; it was sometimes difficult to remember that the majority of them had only one or two powers, not a full suite.

Prof roared in outrage. I didn't dare look at him; he'd been intimidating enough when he *hadn't* been trying to kill me. Instead, I sprinted for the open stairwell door and gunned down the surprised Epic standing inside.

Megan followed me. "Duck!" she shouted at me as people in the room behind us pulled out guns. A few fired.

I dove through the doors. Nobody outside got off more than two or three shots before an explosion rocked the room, cracking saltstone walls and sending a shower of dust raining down.

I coughed, blinking salt from my eyes, and struggled to my feet. It had been one of Megan's grenades. I managed to grab her outstretched hand and join her in running down the steps.

"Sparks," she said, "I can't believe we're alive."

"Wiper," I said. "Her bursts negate Epic powers, specifically external usages, like Prof's forcefields. Her burst left him momentarily unable to trap us."

"Could we have…"

"Killed him?" I asked. "No. Wiper would have been executed by one High Epic or another long ago if her powers were that strong. She can't… well, couldn't…remove an Epic's innate protections, just fiddle with manifestations for a second or two. Forcefields, illusions, that sort of thing."

Megan nodded. The stairwell was dark—nobody had thought to hang lights in here—but we heard when people ventured in from above. Megan pulled back against the wall, looking up. I could make her out by the light trickling down from above.

I nodded to her unasked question when she glanced at me. We needed time to plan, and that meant keeping the pressure off us. She pulled her other mini-grenade from her thigh case, then activated it and tossed it upward.

The second explosion sent chunks of saltstone tumbling down on us, and seemed to have broken an entire section of steps above. I nodded to her, and we looked down the stairwell. There was no way we'd be able to take this stairway down seventy floors without finding ourselves trapped at the bottom. We needed another way out.

"David?" Cody's voice. "I spotted some explosions up there. Y'all all right?"

"No," I said over the line, "we've been compromised."

Abraham swore softly in French. "We left the backup equipment, David. Where are you?"

David and Mizzy had brought extra wire climbers, in case there were more prisoners than Tia—or in case Megan and I joined them. Mission parameters called for emergency equipment to be left behind, just in case.

"We're right by the door to floor seventy," I said. "Where's the equipment?"

"Black backpack," Abraham said, "hidden in the air vent near the service elevator. But David, that level was flooding with guards when we were leaving."

It would also be the same floor where Tia had given them the slip to go after Prof's data. I wasn't sure I could save her though. Sparks. I wasn't sure I could save *myself* at this point.

"Radio chatter went silent right after Abraham was spotted," Cody said.

“They must have some kind of secure signal to use in emergencies. And they won’t be using Knighthawk mobiles, you can bet your kilt on that.”

Great. Well, at least with that pack, Megan and I had a chance. My back to the wall beside the door onto the seventieth floor, I took out my mobile. Its light bathed us as we examined the map that Cody helpfully sent of this level. We were marked as a green dot; the elevator, red.

That red dot was halfway across the sparking building. Lovely. I memorized the route—noticing Prof’s chambers. We’d travel close to it, down a hallway right outside his suite.

I glanced at Megan, and she nodded. We slid the door open and Megan leaped out, gun ready, checking right and then left. I followed, keeping watch down the right hallway as she scouted ahead to the left. A string of lightbulbs hung along the ceiling, revealing absurdly beautiful waves of red salt shot through the otherwise black and grey walls. It looked like a pigeon on fire.

I exhaled. No guards yet. The two of us continued down the left hallway, passing closed doors that I knew led into luxurious apartments. By the time we’d reached the end of the hall, I was feeling pretty good about our chances. Maybe the guards had all been pulled out to search other floors or to protect Prof upstairs.

Then the wall about ten feet in front of us disintegrated.

We stumbled back as the night wind whipped in through a new gap in the outside wall of the building, blowing in more salt dust from seventy floors up in the air. I raised my hand against the salt, blinking.

Prof hovered outside on a glowing green disc. He stepped off it and into the building, feet crunching on salt dust. Megan cursed, backing away, gun out in front of her. I remained in position and searched Prof’s face, hoping for some sign of warmth; pity, even. I found only a sneer.

He raised his hands at his sides, summoning lances of green light—spears of forcefield to impale us. In that moment, I felt something unexpected.

Pure anger.

Anger at Prof for not being strong enough to resist the darkness. The emotion had been hidden within me, tucked away behind a series of rationalizations: He’d saved Babilar. Regalia had manipulated him into his fall. The things he did weren’t his fault.

None of that stopped me from being angry—*furious*—at him anyway.

He was supposed to be better than this. He was supposed to have been invincible!

Something trembled inside me, like an ancient leviathan stirring in its slumber within a den of water and stone. The hair on my arms stood up, and my muscles tensed, as if I were straining to lift something heavy.

I looked into Prof's eyes and saw my death reflected back at me, and something within me said *no.*

That sense of confidence was gone in a moment, replaced with sheer terror. We were going to die.

I leaped to the side, dodging a spear of light. I rolled as Megan jumped back against the wall, managing to get out of the way of another razor-sharp lance of forcefield.

I tried to scramble down the hallway, but smashed right into a glowing green wall. I groaned, turning to see Prof studying me with a look of disdain. He raised a hand to destroy me.

Something tiny hit him in the side of the head. He started, then turned, and another one smacked him in the forehead. Bullets?

"*Oh* yeah," Cody said over the line. "Did y'all see that? Who just sniped a guy at a thousand yards? I did."

The bullets didn't penetrate Prof's defensive powers, though they did seem to annoy him. I scrambled over to Megan. "Can you do anything?" I asked.

"I…"

A forcefield sprang up, surrounding both me and Megan, gouging out a large chunk of the saltstone floor as well. Sparks. This was it. We were going to be crushed like Val and Exel.

I reached for Megan, wanting to be holding her as it happened. She had adopted a look of concentration, teeth clenched, eyes staring sightlessly.

The air shimmered. Then someone *else* appeared inside the globe with us.

I blinked in surprise. The newcomer was a teenage girl with red hair worn short in a pixie cut. She had on a plain pair of jeans and an old denim jacket. She gasped and looked up at the forcefield globe surrounding us.

Prof closed his hand into a fist to make the globe shrink, but the young woman thrust her hands to the sides. I felt a *thrumming* vibration, like a voice with no sound. I knew that sound. The tensors?

Prof's forcefield disintegrated, dropping us to the ground. I lost my balance, though the young woman landed easily on two feet. I was utterly baffled, but I was alive. I'd take that exchange. I grabbed Megan, pulling her away from the girl. "Megan?" I hissed. "What did you do?"

Megan continued to stare sightlessly.

"Megan?"

"Shhh," she snapped. "This is *hard.*"

"But…"

Prof cocked his head.

The girl stepped forward. "…Father?" she asked.

"Father?" I repeated.

"I couldn't find an uncorrupted version of him in a close enough reality," Megan muttered. "So I brought what I *could* find. Let's see if your plan works."

Prof regarded his "daughter" contemplatively, then waved his hand, summoning another forcefield around Megan. The girl destroyed it in a flash, hands forward, releasing a burst of tensor power.

"Father," the girl said. "How are you here? What's happening?"

"I have no daughter," Prof said.

"What? Father, it's *me.* Tavi. Please, why—"

"I have no daughter!" Prof roared. "Your lies will not fool me, Megan! Traitor!"

He thrust his hands to the sides and spears of green light appeared there, shaped like glass shards. He flung them down the hallway toward us, but Tavi waved her hand, releasing a burst of power. That *was* the tensor power—as Tavi destroyed the spears of light, she vaporized the wall nearby as well. It fell to dust.

A set of blue-green spears appeared around Tavi, just like Prof's. Sparks! She had his same power portfolio.

Prof's eyes widened. Was that fear in his expression? Worry? Megan hadn't brought a version of him into this world, but this was apparently close enough. Yes, he was afraid of her powers. *His* powers.

Face your fears, Prof, I thought, desperate. *Don't flee. Fight!*

He bellowed in frustration, sweeping his hands before him, destroying the hallway in a long swath and sending a wave of salt dust over us. Forcefields flashed into existence—shards of light that struck at Tavi, walls

that swept in to crush, a cacophony of destruction.

"Yes!" I shouted. He wasn't running.

Then, unfortunately, the floor disappeared beneath me.

31

PROF'S wave of destructive power had ended right about as it hit me, and though I fell into the hole in the floor, I was able to reach out and grab the edge to stop myself. Megan knelt by the ledge, oblivious to the hole that had opened beside her.

The drop was about ten feet, but that was a little far for me to want to risk. I started to pull myself up.

"David," Tia's voice suddenly said in my ear, "what are you doing?"

"Trying not to die," I said with a grunt, still dangling. "You still here on the seventieth floor somewhere?"

"In Jon's chambers, trying to get into his office. Can you cut the power for me, maybe? There's an electronic lock on the security door here."

A tensor wave hummed above, and I heard an ominous groan from the ceiling.

"Dampener is gone, Tia," I said, getting to my feet—and finding myself in a war zone. "And we have bigger troubles than getting into Prof's rooms. He's *here*."

"Sparks!" Tia said. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

"Yes and no."

In the moments I'd been down, Prof and Tavi had leveled walls separating rooms, creating a much larger field of battle. They exchanged bursts of light and tensor powers, leaving rips and craters in the floor.

That ceiling wasn't going to last much longer. I sought out Megan, who knelt beside the remnants of a wall. She hissed between clenched teeth,

watching the contest with unblinking eyes. I stepped toward her, but when she looked at me, her lips curled, teeth clenched. A sneer.

Uh-oh.

This was dangerous. She'd pulled too many things through to our world too quickly.

But sparks, it was *working*. Prof was backing down the hallway before an assault by Tavi—flying spears of blue light, which he was able to vaporize with his tensor power. The outer wall to his left was in shambles, wind howling through. To his right, rooms were pocked with holes, the floor and walls almost completely destroyed.

I threw myself toward Megan as the ceiling to Prof's right fell in. Blinking—sparks, that salt made a scrape I'd gotten on my arm *sting*—I saw spears of glowing green launch toward Tavi, their light illuminating the dust around them. She deflected those, barely.

Prof had lost his air of uncompromising confidence; he was sweating and cursing as he fought, and—to my surprise—I saw a few scratches on his arm.

They weren't healing.

Her powers were indeed negating his. But why hadn't he turned good? Hadn't he confronted his fears?

"David," Tia said, anxious. "It sounds like the entire *building* is coming down. Are you all right?"

"For now. Tia…Megan summoned a version of him from another world. Someone with his powers. They're fighting."

"Sparks!" Tia cursed over the line. "You're insane." She grew silent for a moment as I stared at Prof, mouth agape, awed by the use of power. "All right," Tia said, sounding reluctant. "I'm coming to you."

"No," I said. "Stay hidden. I don't think there's anything you can do. Anything *any* of us can do."

I looked at Megan, her teeth clenched, and started toward her.

She looked at me, angry. "Stay back, David," she growled. "Just…stay back."

I stopped, then sighed and scuttled farther down the corridor—toward Prof and Tavi. Stupid, perhaps, but I needed to watch this. I passed the room where the ceiling had collapsed on my right, then came up toward the two combatants. The corridor turned here, but they'd continued on, vaporizing the wall and stepping into a lavish suite.

Prof unleashed a wave of tensor power toward Tavi, melting tables and chairs and hitting her full force. Buttons on her shirt disintegrated to dust, though the shirt didn't. Only dense nonliving materials were affected.

Her forcefields vanished. She jumped for cover, narrowly dodging lances of light. It took a count of three before she was able to summon a forcefield to block oncoming blasts. It was *working*. She seemed to have the same weakness as Prof: the powers themselves, wielded by someone else. Getting hit by the tensors negated her abilities for a time, like fire did to Megan.

Could I do something? Explain this to her? I stepped forward, then hesitated as the air warped near me.

I was drawn into a momentary vision of another world: Firefight standing on a rooftop, hands clenched at his sides, fire rising from his fists. A night sky. Cold air punctuated by bursts of heat from the Epic.

The vision passed, and I was on the skyscraper battlefield again. I stepped away from the warping air, then took cover behind a broken saltstone wall, outside the room where Prof and Tavi were fighting. A few spears of light shot overhead, slamming into the wall above me like forks into a cake.

Now that I knew to look, I spotted other places where the air twisted and warped. They dotted the corridors and rooms; Megan's powers were tearing our reality apart, interweaving it with Firefight's.

That seemed to me like a very, very bad thing.

The lights suddenly dimmed, went out—then almost immediately came back on. Prof and Tavi didn't even pause in their contest, but I did notice that the young woman looked far more haggard than he did. She was sweating, her teeth clenched, and tears streaked her face, washing through the prevalent salt dust there.

"Sparks," Tia cursed over the line. "Still can't get through this door. Jon has a backup generator in his rooms somewhere. It turned on when I cut the wires; I can hear it chugging inside."

"You're still going on about that?" I demanded.

"I'm not just going to *sit* here," she said. "If he's distracted, then—"

She cut off as Prof released a wave of tensor power—intended to stop a sweeping forcefield—and it blasted the wall of the suite he was fighting in. The wall fell in, revealing another suite of rooms beside it—where Tia was kneeling on the floor.

She cursed and ducked beside the broken wall. “Didn’t realize you’d gotten so close,” she said through the line. “Wait. That girl looks familiar. Is that…”

Oh boy…

“Lad,” Cody said over the line, “I can’t make out what’s going on up there. Are y’all *fighting* him somehow?”

“Kind of,” I said, sliding my gun from its holster. Prof was consumed by his conflict with Tavi. A spike hit the girl, pinning her arm, spraying blood against the wall in a gruesome display. She fell to her knees, and moments later the wound started to heal. She deflected further spears of light with tensor power, clutching her arm. She then wobbled to her feet, flesh scabbed over, blood stanched.

Still hiding near the hole into the room, I gaped. She healed. And her powers had come back far quicker than Megan’s did after touching fire.

Like Edmund. Her weakness doesn’t affect her as much as it does Prof or the others. She’s faced her fears, overcome them long ago, perhaps?

Prof still bore the cuts where she’d hit him. Yet I couldn’t help feeling that I was missing something *big* about the nature of powers and weaknesses. Prof was fighting her. Wouldn’t that mean facing his fears himself? Why was he still so obviously consumed by the darkness?

Inside the room, and through the broken wall on the west, Tia had finally managed to get into Prof’s office. I could barely make her out in there, moving past a generator like the one we’d found above. She sat down at his desk and began furiously working at the computer there.

But Tavi…poor Tavi. I didn’t know her, but my heart wrenched to see her being driven back by Prof’s blasts of power. She still fought, but she was obviously less experienced with combat than he was.

I stood up, gripping my little pistol in two hands. Over my shoulder, I saw Megan approaching down the hallway, actively weeping, her face a mask of pain and concentration.

I had to stop this. It wasn’t working, and it was destroying Megan. I leveled my gun at Prof while he was focused on Tavi; I breathed out and fell still. I waited for a wave of Tavi’s tensor power to wash over him, destroying a forcefield.

Then I fired.

I can’t say if I pulled to the side on purpose, or if it was an effect of the

floor shaking. The ceiling here was straining like the one in the other room; too many walls gone.

Either way, my shot clipped Prof on the side of the face instead of drilling him right in the back of the head. The bullet ripped off a chunk of his cheek, spraying blood. His innate forcefield protections were down. Maybe I could have killed him.

The moment passed. Prof tossed up a forcefield wall behind him to prevent other shots—an almost absent gesture, as if I were an afterthought. Calamity…what if he killed Tavi? We'd pulled her from her reality and thrust her into our war. I looked again at Megan.

Fire, I thought. That was another way to end this. I fished in my pocket, searching for my lighter. Where was it? I hadn't even noticed how ragged my clothing had become, the nice coat covered in salt, the trousers ripped. I couldn't find my lighter; I'd lost it somewhere.

I did find something else in my pocket though. A small cylinder. Knighthawk's tissue sample incubator.

I looked up, toward where I'd shot Prof. Dared I? Could Megan hold out a little more?

I made my decision and dashed across the room, ducking around the forcefield and hopping over the remnants of a sofa that had been half melted by the tensor. This put me in the middle of the battle, Prof and Tavi fighting near the lush room's wet bar. Waves of dust blew over me, getting into my eyes. Salt forced its way into my mouth, making me want to gag. The ground rocked, and I threw myself to the floor, rolling out of the way as an invisible tensor blast gouged a large hole nearby. Dust rained down from a hole in the ceiling.

I came up, skirting very close to Prof as I made for the bloodstain on the floor. He turned on me, eyes wide with fury. Sparks, sparks, *sparks!*

I skidded across the floor and—in the bloody patch—found a loose chunk of skin from his cheek. He'd already healed from the shot. Apparently the cuts remained unhealable only if he was hit by one of the spikes of light. An ordinary wound would start healing as soon as his powers reasserted themselves.

I scooped up the piece of flesh into Knighthawk's device, too panicked to worry about the morbidity of it. Prof summoned spikes of light, a dozen or more. He roared, flinging them toward me.

I threw myself sideways.

Right into one of the shifting ripples in the air.

32

THIS time I didn't drop twenty feet after transitioning to the other world, which was a plus. I instead rolled onto the top of a roof in a quiet section of the city. This wasn't a skyscraper, just some apartment building, though an admittedly tall one.

Nothing was dissolving, no gunfire sounded, and there was a complete absence of the disconcerting hum of Prof's tensor power. Only the serene night sky. Beautiful…with no red spot to glare down upon me.

I clutched the tissue sample, lying there, and stared up at the sky, drawing in a few calming breaths. That might have been the craziest thing I'd ever done, and my life so far had set a pretty high bar.

"You," a voice said from behind me.

I rolled over to a kneeling position, holding Prof's cells closer with one fist while raising my handgun with the other. Firefight hovered beside the rooftop, alight and burning, skin and clothing consumed by his curling flames. Bullets wouldn't hurt a fire Epic; they'd simply melt away. Had I traded one deadly situation for another?

I have to stall until I'm pulled back into my own world, I thought. Except…how long would I stay, if Megan wasn't actively trying to pull me back? I couldn't have slipped over permanently, right?

Firefight was inscrutable, his aura of heat and flame warping the air around him. Eventually he stepped up onto the rooftop and, surprisingly, his flames dampened. Clothing emerged, a jacket over a tight T-shirt, a pair of jeans. The fire continued to burn along his arms, but it was subdued, like the last flames of a campfire before they gave themselves up to the embers. His

face was the same as the other times I'd seen him.

"What have you done with Tavi?" he demanded. "If you've hurt her…"

I licked my lips, which were extremely dry and salty. "I…" Again, the morality of what we'd done smacked me upside the head, like the fist of the Factory's lunch lady after I'd tried to steal an extra muffin. "She's been sucked into my world."

"So Tia *is* right. You are actively looking to pull us into your dimension?" He strode forward, his fires flaring up again. "Why are you doing this? What is your plot?"

I scrambled backward on the rooftop. "It's not that! Or, well, we didn't know—Megan didn't, at first, know what—I mean, we didn't—"

I had no idea what I was trying to say.

Fortunately Firefight stopped, then dampened his flames once more. "Specks, you're terrified." He took a deep breath. "Look, can you bring Tavi back? We're in the middle of something. We need her."

"Tia…," I said, lowering my gun as I put it together. "Wait. You're one of the Reckoners?"

"Is that why you keep pulling me into your world?" he asked. "Is there no version of me there?"

"I…think you might be a girl," I said. *And dating me.* I'd noticed the similarities before; Firefight was blond and had a face that, if you ignored its masculinity, was reminiscent of Megan's.

"Yes…," he said, nodding. "I've noticed her. She's the one who pulls me through. Odd to think that I might have a sister, in another place, another world."

A flash of light ignited a building nearby—a tall, round building. Sharp Tower? For the first time I realized that I was still in the same district of Ildithia. But outside the tower, on top of a building like the one where Cody had set up.

Firefight spun toward the explosion, then cursed. "Stay here," he said. "I'll deal with you later."

"Wait," I said, scrambling to my feet. That flash…it felt familiar. "Obliteration. That light was caused by Obliteration, wasn't it?"

"You know him?" Firefight said, spinning back to me.

"Yeah," I said, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. "You could say that. Why are—"

“Wait,” Firefight said, putting his hand to his ear. “Yes, I saw it. He’s come to Sharp Tower. You were right.” He squinted, looking up at the taller building. “I want to engage. I don’t care if he’s trying to lure me, Tia. We have to face him eventually.”

I hesitantly walked over beside Firefight, who stood at the edge of our building. There was so much that was different here, but so much was the same. Obliteration, Ildithia itself. *Tia,* apparently? And Tavi…her daughter?

The flash of heat from Obliteration returned, a deep pulsing heat. The salt couldn’t catch fire, but Obliteration continued radiating it. Shadows moved up there. I squinted, and then—silhouetted against the flames—I saw figures leap from the windows.

“Specks!” Firefight said. “Tia, there are people up there. Jumping out to avoid the heat he’s creating. I’m going.”

Firefight burst alight and streaked into the air—though I could see that he wouldn’t reach the people in time. It was too far, and they were falling too quickly. My heart lurched. What a terrible decision: be burned by Obliteration, or fall to your death? I wanted to tear my eyes away, but couldn’t. Those poor souls.

Someone else leaped from the room atop the burning building. A figure with glowing hands—a magnificent form that shot downward, trailing a silvery cape. Like a meteor, he made a brilliant, powerful streak of light as he rocketed toward the falling people. My breath caught as he seized the first person, then the second.

I stumbled backward. *No.*

Firefight turned around and landed by me again. “Never mind,” he said to Tia, his flames partially dampening. “He got here in time. Should have known. When has he ever been late?”

I knew that figure. Dark clothing. Powerful build. Even at a distance, even in the gloom of night, I *knew* that man. I’d spent my life studying him, watching him, hunting him.

“Steelheart,” I whispered. I shook myself, then grabbed Firefight, completely forgetting he was on fire. The flames vanished on contact, fortunately, and I wasn’t burned. “Steelheart is *helping* you?”

“Of course he is,” Firefight said, frowning.

“Steelheart…,” I said. “Steelheart’s not *evil*?”

He raised an eyebrow at me as if I’d gone insane.

"And no Calamity," I said, looking at the sky.

"Calamity?"

"The red star!" I said. "That brought the Epics."

"Invocation?" he said. "It vanished a year after it arrived; it's been gone a decade."

"Do you feel the darkness?" I demanded. "The drive toward selfishness that strikes every Epic?"

"What are you *talking* about, Charleston?"

No Calamity, no darkness, a *good* Steelheart.

Sparks!

"This changes everything," I whispered.

"Look, I've told you before that you must meet him," Firefight said. "He refuses to believe what I've seen, but he *needs* to talk to you."

"Why me? What does he care about me?"

"Well," Firefight said, "he killed you."

In my world, I killed him. Here, he killed me. "How did it happen? I have to…"

I felt a lurch. A shimmering. "I'm going," I said, starting to disappear. "I can't stop it. We'll send Tavi back. Tell him…tell him I'll return. I have to —

"—figure out what happened here," I finished, but Firefight was gone. The rooftop was gone. In its place was a room of dust and glowing light. Two Epics at battle. They'd moved into the hallway again, skirting Prof's chambers. That left them to my right—where most of the hallway's walls were gone.

Guards had arrived during my absence, and they'd set up at the corner in the hallway, near where I'd been hiding. They'd begun ganging up on Tavi, firing barrages down the hallway in her direction.

No Calamity…

I had to tell someone! I spotted Tia easily, working furtively at a computer station inside the next apartment over—in front of me and a little to my left. A stream of salt trickled down onto my head, and the ceiling groaned.

I looked over my shoulder to see Megan striding through the suite toward me. Tall, deliberate, her head thrust back and hands at her sides, each finger trailing a ripple in reality. A High Epic in her glory.

She looked at me, and *snarled.*
Right. I had a bigger problem to deal with.

33

FIRE. I needed *fire.*

It seemed a cruel irony that mere moments ago I had been standing next to a man literally made of flame, yet now I couldn't find even a spark.

I shoved Prof's captured cells into my pocket, then scrambled to my feet and crossed the suite, doing my best to stay low. The guards were falling back. As I frantically searched for some way to create a flame, I spotted Tavi out in the hallway on her knees, surrounded by several layered bubbles of light. Presumably the innermost was her own. She huddled there with head bowed, skin plastered with salt dust streaked by sweat, trembling.

My heart lurched, but I ran for Tia, hoping she might have a lighter. Megan reached for me, but I dodged her. The air still rippled around me. I caught glimpses of other worlds, of alien landscapes, of places where this plain had become a jungle. Another where it was a barren wasteland of dust and stone. I saw armies of glowing Epics, and piles of the dead.

A large portion of the ceiling behind me caved in, crashing down with a cacophony of stone grinding against stone. It collapsed a section of the floor and knocked my feet from under me. I hit the ground shoulder first, skidding through salt.

When I finally came to a stop, I blinked away dust, coughing. Sparks. My leg hurt. I'd twisted my ankle in the fall.

The debris settled to reveal that most of the floor of the suite was gone. I had ended up inside Prof's chambers, near Tia, who had taken cover beside the desk, her mobile gripped tightly in her fist. It was connected by wires to the data drive of a computer powered—along with the swinging lightbulbs—

by the small generator that puttered in the corner.

Megan hadn't so much as flinched. She turned toward me. Behind her, on the other side of the hole in the floor, Prof's guards called to one another and pulled themselves out of the rubble. To her right, Prof loomed over Tavi, who was crumpled on the floor. Her forcefield was gone. She stirred, but didn't rise.

Megan met my eyes, hands raised before her. Her lips curled in a sneer, but she held my gaze, then gritted her teeth. I sensed a plea in her expression. Still lying on the broken floor, I yanked my gun from its holster, then leveled it and fired.

At the generator.

Like the one above, it had a gas tank. It didn't explode as I'd expected, but the shots punctured it and sparked a fire, sending up jets of flame.

The lights immediately went out.

"No!" Tia cried.

Megan stared into the fire, and it danced in her eyes.

"Face it, Megan," I whispered. "Please."

She stepped toward it, as if drawn by its heat. Then she screamed and ran forward, passing me and thrusting her arm into the flames.

Megan collapsed. Tavi vanished. The rents in the air shrank away. I let out a relieved breath and managed to crawl over to Megan, dragging my pained foot behind me.

She trembled, clutching her arm, which she'd burned severely. I pulled her farther from the generator, in case it flared up, and folded her into my arms.

In the pitch-black room, there were only two lights: the dwindling fire…

And Prof.

Megan squeezed her eyes shut, shaking from her ordeal. She'd saved our lives, had put my plan into motion, and it hadn't been enough. I could see that easily as Prof strode toward us. He stepped up to the lip of the broken hole in the floor, then across it, a forcefield forming under his feet. Lit from beneath, he looked like a specter, his face mostly in shadow.

Prof had always possessed a kind of…unfinished look. Features like a stack of broken bricks, his face usually accented by stubble. Today though, I could spot signs of exhaustion as well. The slowness of his step, the streaks of sweat on his face, the slump to his shoulders. His fight with Tavi had been

difficult. He was practically indestructible, but he *did* get tired.

He studied me and Megan. "Kill them," he said, then turned his back on us and walked off into the shadows.

Two dozen guards lowered their weapons to fire. I pulled Megan close, close enough to hear her whisper.

"I die as me," she said. "At least I die as me."

Fire. Her powers were negated. She was always without them for a minute or two after deliberately burning herself.

If she died now, would it be permanent?

No.

No…What have I done?

I twisted, sheltering her as the guards opened fire in a terrible barrage. The walls exploded in sprays of salt chips. The computer monitor shattered. Bullets pelted the area, accompanied by the earsplitting sound of weapons fire.

I clutched Megan close, my back to the assault.

Something stirred again within me. Those depths lurking in my soul, the blackness below. Shadows moving around me, screams, emotions like spikes piercing me, the sudden and overpowering sensation from my dreams. I threw back my head and screamed.

The gunfire stilled, a few last pops sounding as the magazines fell empty. With an enemy Epic in their sights, these people had not hesitated or held back. Several flipped on lights attached to their guns, to inspect their handiwork.

I awaited the pain, or at least the numbness, that came from having been shot. I felt neither. Hesitant, I turned to look behind me. Destruction surrounded us—floor, walls, furniture splintered, pocked, broken…all except in my immediate area. The ground here wasn't broken at all. In fact, it was glassy and reflective. A deep, burnished silver-black. Metallic.

I was alive.

Regalia's voice whispered from my memory. *I have been assured that you will be…thematically appropriate.*

"Impressive," Prof said from the shadows. "What did she do? Open a door to another world and send the bullets through?" He sounded tired. "I will have to do this myself. Don't think it doesn't pain me."

"Jonathan…," a voice whispered.

I frowned. It had come from nearby. Who—

I'd forgotten about Tia.

She slumped against the saltstone desk, lit by the fluttering firelight. She had been hiding there, but the bullets had gotten her. She bled from multiple hits, mobile clutched in her fingers. It had been shot straight through.

"Jon," she said. "You bastard. You feared it would come to…this." She coughed. "I was wrong, and you were right. As…always."

Prof stepped into the light of the soldiers' weapons. That haggard, broken face seemed to change, his jaw dropping. He seemed to *see* for the first time that night. So he got to watch as Tia breathed a last ragged breath and died.

I knelt, stunned, and barely heard Prof's roar—his sudden, shocked cry of agony and regret. He tore across the hole in the floor on a field of light, charging past me and Megan, ignoring us as he grabbed Tia.

"Heal!" he commanded her. "Heal! I gift it to you!"

I held on to Megan, deadened, disbelieving. Tia's figure remained limp in his hands.

The floor vaporized. The walls, the ceiling, the *entire tower.* It all shattered to dust in the face of Prof's tormented scream. Soldiers dropped like stones, though a bubble sprang up around Prof and Tia.

My stomach lurched as Megan and I also began to plummet through salt dust seventy stories toward the ground. "Megan!" I shouted.

Her eyes had drooped closed. I held on to her, tumbling.

No. No. *NO.*

Bodies fell around us in the night, sprays of dust and furniture, scraps of cloth. They passed us.

"Megan!" I screamed again, over the sound of wind and terrified soldiers. "Wake up!"

Her eyes flared open and seemed to burn in the night. I jerked, barely keeping hold of her—as suddenly I was in a parachute's harness.

We smacked the ground mere moments later, hitting with a distressing *crunch.* Then the pain arrived. I gasped at its intensity, like a wave of electricity running up my body from my legs. It was so overpowering, I couldn't move. I suffered it, staring upward into the black sky.

And at Calamity, who stared back.

Time passed. Not much, but enough. I heard footsteps. “He’s here,” Abraham’s voice said, urgent. “You were right. Sparks! That *was* a parachute. One of ours, but I didn’t leave any behind….”

I turned my head, blinking away salt dust to find him, a hulking form in the night.

“I’ve got you, David,” Abraham said, taking me by the arm.

“Megan,” I whispered. “Under the chute.” It had drifted down over her after we hit.

Abraham moved over, picking at the parachute. “She’s here,” he said, sounding relieved. “And she’s breathing. Cody, Mizzy, I need your help. David, we’re going to have to move you. We can’t wait. Prof’s up there, glowing. He could come down at any moment.”

I braced myself as Abraham hefted me over his shoulder. The other two arrived, pulling Megan out of the rubble. There was no time to worry whether they were doing more damage than good.

They dragged us off into the night, leaving behind the wreckage of a mission we had failed, utterly and completely.

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I didn't sleep, though when Cody had us pause in an alley to see if we were being tailed, I let Abraham give me something for the pain. Mizzy worked on a litter to help carry Megan and me while Abraham inspected me. Turned out I'd snapped both legs when I hit the ground.

The sky had turned sour by the time we left that alley, and a misty rain started falling on us, making the roadway slick with salty water. The saltstone held up better than I'd have expected though. No mass melting of the city.

The rain felt good at first, washing some of the dust from my skin as I lay in the litter beside Megan. But by the time we approached the bridge in the park, I was soaked through. The lumpish sight of our base, growing under the bridge ahead like some strange fungus, was a beautiful thing.

Megan was still unconscious, but she seemed to have fared better than I had. No broken bones that Abraham could find, though she was going to have some serious bruises, and her arm was burned and blistered.

"Well, we're alive," Cody said as we stopped at the doorway to the hideout. "Unless of course we didn't spot a tail and Prof is lurking out there, waiting for us to lead him to Larcener."

"Your optimism is so encouraging, Cody," Mizzy said.

It took a little work to navigate our litter through the entrance, which we'd made as a small tunnel covered in rubble on one end. I was able to help by pushing with my hands. My legs still hurt, but it was more a "Hey, don't forget about us" kind of hurt than the "HOLY HECK, WE'RE BROKEN" it had been before.

The hideout smelled of the soup Larcener liked—a simple vegetable broth with almost no taste. Abraham lit the place with his mobile.

"Turn that off, idiot," Larcener snapped from his room.

He must be meditating again. I sat up in my litter as Mizzy crawled in, then sighed and dropped her equipment into a pile. "I need a shower," she called to Larcener. "What's a girl got to do to get you to conjure one?"

"Die," Larcener called back.

"Mizzy," Abraham said softly, "check over the equipment, and return to Larcener the things he created for us, with our thanks. It probably does not matter, as they will just fade away, but perhaps the gesture will mean something to him. Cody, watch outside for any signs of pursuit. Now that we have more time, I want to check these two over more thoroughly."

I nodded dully. Yeah. Orders. Orders needed to be given. But…the trip here was something of a blur to me. "We need a debriefing," I said. "I've discovered things."

"Later, David," Abraham said gently.

"But—"

"You're in shock, David," he said. "Let us rest first."

I sighed and lay back. I didn't feel like I was in shock. Sure, I was clammy and cold—but I'd been rained on. Yes, I was trembling, and hadn't been able to think of much during the trip here. But that was because of how thoroughly *draining* it had all been.

I doubted he'd listen to my arguments. Despite the fact that he agreed I was in charge, Abraham could be downright motherly. I did convince him to see to Megan first, and with Mizzy's help he carried her away to change her out of the wet, ripped evening gown and make sure she hadn't suffered any unnoticed wounds. Then Abraham returned to splint my legs.

About an hour later Abraham, Mizzy, and I huddled together in the smallest of the rooms in our new base—far enough from Larcener to speak privately, we hoped. Megan lay bundled up in the corner, asleep.

Abraham kept eyeing me, expecting me to doze off. I remained stubbornly awake, seated against the wall with my splinted legs stretched before me. They'd given me some industrial-strength painkillers, so I was able to confidently stare back at him.

Abraham sighed. "Let me check on Cody," he said. "Then we will talk."

That left me and Mizzy. She sipped some hot cocoa she'd bought at the market a few days ago. I couldn't stand the stuff. Way too sweet.

"So," she said, "that…wasn't a *complete* disaster, right?"

"Tia's dead," I said, my voice hoarse. "We failed."

Mizzy winced, looking down into her cup. "Yeah. But…I mean…you got to test one of your theories. We know more than we did yesterday."

I shook my head, sick with worry over Megan, frustrated that we'd gone through so much to save Tia only to lose her for good. I felt adrift, and defeated, and pained. I'd looked up to Tia; she'd been one of the first of the team to treat me like someone useful. Now I'd failed her.

Could I have done more? I hadn't said anything about how I'd survived the gunfire. Truth was, I didn't know the answer myself. I mean…I suspected. But I didn't *know,* so what use was there in talking about it?

Lying to ourselves, are we? a piece of me asked.

"That parachute," Mizzy said, glancing at Megan. "She made it, didn't she?"

I nodded.

"She put it on you, instead of on herself," Mizzy said. "She's always like that. I suppose if you're reborn when you die, it makes sense…." She trailed off.

Abraham stepped back in. "He's as happy as a jackrabbit in its den," he said. "Hunkered up on the bridge in his raincoat, chewing on beef jerky and looking for something to shoot. Nothing so far. We may actually have escaped."

He settled down, sitting cross-legged. Then he carefully removed the pendant he wore, the symbol of the Faithful, and held it before himself. It sparkled, silvery, in the light of the mobiles we'd set out.

"Abraham," I said. "I know that…I mean, Tia was a friend…."

"More than a friend," he said softly. "My superior officer, and one I disobeyed. I believe we made the right call, and she the wrong one, but I cannot take her loss lightly. Please. A moment."

We waited, and he closed his eyes and said a quiet prayer in French. Was it to God, or to those mythical Epics he believed would save us someday? He wrapped the chain of his pendant into his hand and held it close, but as usual I couldn't get a good feel for his emotional state. Reverence? Pain? Worry?

Finally, he took a deep breath and put the necklace back on. "You have information, David. You feel it important to share. We will mourn Tia

properly when the war is through. Speak. What happened in there?"

He and Mizzy looked at me expectantly, so I swallowed, then started talking. I'd already told them about Tavi, but now I explained what had happened when I'd been sucked into Firefight's world. The things I'd seen. Steelheart.

I rambled a lot. In truth, I *was* tired. They probably were as well, but I couldn't go to sleep. Not before unloading the burden of what I'd seen, what I'd discovered. I told them everything I could before eventually trailing off. Any more, and I'd have to talk about what I suspected regarding my own… development.

"He killed you?" Abraham said. "In their world, Steelheart killed you? Is that what they said?"

I nodded.

"Curious. That world is similar to our own, yet different in such important ways."

"You didn't ask him about me, did you?" Mizzy asked.

"No. Why? Should I have?"

She yawned. "I dunno. Maybe I'm, like, some kinda super-awesome ninja thing over there."

"I'd say you were a super-awesome ninja thing today," Abraham said. "You performed that mission well."

She blushed, taking a drink of her cocoa.

"A world with no Calamity," Abraham said. "But what does that—" His mobile started buzzing. He frowned, looking at it. "I do not know this number." He turned it around toward me.

"Knighthawk," I said. "Answer it."

He did so, lifting it to his ear, then moved it away as Knighthawk started talking loudly. Abraham lowered the phone. "He is excited about something," he said.

"Obviously," Mizzy said. "Speaker that sucker."

Abraham pressed the requisite buttons. Knighthawk's face appeared on the mobile and his voice projected into the room.

"—can't believe the *balls* on that woman. What happened to David's mobile? Did he get it vaporized? I haven't been able to track the thing for hours."

I pulled mine out. It had survived the fight, barely—with a cracked

screen and a ripped-off back, battery gone.

"It…has seen better days," Abraham said.

"He really needs to be more careful," Knighthawk said. "Those things aren't free."

"I know," I said. "You made us pay for them."

"Heh," Knighthawk said. He was shockingly, even annoyingly, chipper. "I'll send you a replacement on the house after this, kid."

"This?" I asked.

"Regalia's data," he said. "It's incredible. Haven't you been reading it?"

"The data?" I said. "Knighthawk, that was on Tia's…mobile. You *copied* it?"

"Of course I copied it," he said. "You think I built a nationwide network of data links for fun? Well, it *is* fun. But that's because I get to read people's mail."

"Send us a complete dump," Abraham said.

Knighthawk fell silent.

"Knighthawk?" I said. "You're not—"

"Hush," he said. "I'm not ditching you. I just got another call." He swore sharply. "One second."

Silence. The three of us regarded one another, uncertain. If Knighthawk *had* grabbed that data, then perhaps the mission wasn't a complete write-off.

He came back a few minutes later. "Well, hell," he said. "That was Jonathan."

"Prof?" I said.

"Yeah. Demanded that I track you. I don't know how he figured out I can do that. I've always told him I can't."

"And?" Mizzy asked.

"I sent him to the other side of the city," Knighthawk replied. "Nowhere near you guys. Which means that once he's done with you, he's basically *guaranteed* to come murder me. I should have turned you idiots away at my door."

"Um…thank you?" Mizzy said.

"I'm sending you a copy of Regalia's plans," Knighthawk said. "Keep in mind that it references a few photos that aren't in the folder. That's not because I'm holding out on you; it's because the mobile died before finishing the full download of the files. Tell Tia she did great though."

"Tia got shot," I said, subdued. "He killed her."

The line fell silent again, though I heard Knighthawk breathe out after a short time. "Calamity," he whispered. "I never thought he'd go that far. I mean, I knew he would…but *Tia*?"

"I don't think he meant to," I said. "He turned his goons loose on us, and she ended up dead."

"Your transfer is working," Abraham said, holding up his mobile. "Does this data explain what Prof is *doing* here?"

"Sure does," Knighthawk said, growing excited again. "He—"

"He's here for Larcener," I broke in. "He's here to make a motivator from Larcener's assumer abilities, then use that to absorb Calamity's powers—all of them—thereby becoming the ultimate Epic."

Mizzy blinked in shock, and Abraham looked up at me.

"Oh," Knighthawk said. "So you *did* read the data?"

"No," I said. "It just makes sense." The pieces were falling into place. "That's why Regalia brought Obliteration to Babilar, isn't it? She could have come up with a hundred different ways to threaten the city and force Prof to use his powers. But she invited him because she wanted to make a motivator out of his destruction powers to hide what she was *really* doing."

"Making a teleporter," Knighthawk said. "So she could get to Calamity, once she had Larcener's abilities. But she died before putting her plan into motion, so Prof is doing it instead. Sharp guess, kid. You've been holding out on me; you're nowhere near as stupid as you act. As a side note, I'm abandoning my base here. Manny is already carting me to the jeep. I'm *not* going to hang around here when the most dangerous Epic in the world can likely teleport anywhere he wants in an eyeblink."

"He'd alert Obliteration if he did that," I said. "Part of the reason for the bomb in Babilar was to keep Obliteration from knowing that his powers were being stolen."

"Still leaving, at least until Jonathan cools off from my little goose chase."

"Knighthawk," Abraham said. "We need your harmsway. We have wounded."

"Tough," he said. "It's the only one I've got right now. I love you guys—well, I don't actively dislike you guys—but my skin is more important than yours."

"And if I could give you something to make another one?" I asked,

digging in my pocket. I pulled out the tissue sample container and held it up. Abraham obligingly turned his mobile around to give Knighthawk a view.

"Is that…," Knighthawk's voice said.

"Yes. From Prof."

"Everyone else get out of the room. I want to talk to the kid alone."

Abraham raised an eyebrow at me, and I nodded. Reluctantly, Abraham handed me his mobile, and he and Mizzy left. I slumped back against the wall, looking at Knighthawk's face on the screen of the mobile. His own mobile seemed to be secured before him with some kind of device he wore around his neck, as Manny carried him through one of his tunnels.

"You did it," Knighthawk said softly. "How? His forcefields should have protected him from harm."

"Megan reached into an alternate dimension," I said, "and pulled out a version of Prof. Kind of."

"Kind of?"

"His daughter," I said. "His and Tia's, I think. She had his same powers, Knighthawk. And…" I took a deep breath. "And that's his weakness. His powers. At least, so Tia claimed."

"Hmm…," he said. "Makes sense, knowing Jonathan. Odd that his daughter has his powers. Children of Epics here have been born without powers. Anyway, she got past his abilities?"

"Yeah," I said. "I managed to blow a chunk of skin off him and bag it for you."

"Man," Knighthawk said, "we are *really* asking for it here, you realize. If he knows you have that…"

"He does."

Knighthawk shook his head, rueful. "Well, if I'm going to get murdered, might as well let an old friend do it. I'll send you that harmsway via drone, but you send me back that sample. Deal?"

"Deal, with one condition."

"Which is?"

"We need a way to fight Prof," I said. "And make him face his powers."

"Have your pet Epic summon another version of him."

"No. It didn't work; we were able to bypass his powers, but he didn't turn. I need to try something else."

That was true, but only halfway. I glanced at Megan, unconscious and breathing softly. Doing what she'd done tonight had nearly destroyed her; I wouldn't ask her to do something like that again. It wasn't fair to her, and it certainly wasn't fair to the person we brought through into our world.

"So…," Knighthawk said.

I held up the sample container. "There's another way to make him confront someone using his powers, Knighthawk."

The man laughed. "You're serious."

"Serious as a dog about to be given treats," I said. "How long would it take? To make devices for all three powers. Forcefields, regeneration, disintegration."

"Months," Knighthawk said. "A year even, if any of the abilities are tough to crack."

I'd worried about that. "If that's the only way, we'll have to do it." I did not relish being on the run for a year, keeping Larcener out of Prof's hands.

Knighthawk studied me. His mannequin set him into his jeep, then did up the seat belt. "You've got guts," Knighthawk said. "You know how I said we did testing on early Epics and discovered that a living Epic was pained by a motivator created from them?"

"Yeah?"

"Did I tell you *who* we tested on?"

"You have them already," I said. "That's why you're so eager for Prof's cells. You've already *built* devices to replicate his powers."

"We built them together," he said. "He and I."

"In your room," I said. "The one with the mementos of fallen Epics. One didn't have a plaque. A vest and gloves."

"Yeah. We destroyed all his tissue samples after we discovered how much it hurt him. I think that all along he's been worried I would get another sample from him. He's certainly kept his distance from me." Knighthawk's mannequin rubbed his chin, as if in thought. "Guess he was right to worry. You send me those cells, and I will be able to get you devices mimicking his powers almost instantly. But I'm going to try his healing powers on my wife first."

"You do that, and he'll know immediately," I said. "And he'll come kill you."

Knighthawk gritted his teeth.

“You’re going to have to gamble on us, Knighthawk,” I said. “Send us the devices. We’ll turn him, and then we can try to save your wife. It’s the only chance you have.”

“Fine.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s self-preservation at this point, kid,” Knighthawk said. “The drone I send will reach you in six hours. The return trip with your tissue sample will take another six to reach me at my safehouse. Assuming the cells are good, I can get to work on a full set of motivators for you. Forcefield projection, healing powers, and tensor abilities.”

“Will do.”

“And David,” Knighthawk said as his mannequin started the jeep. “Don’t get cute. This time if he doesn’t turn, do what we both know you need to. After killing Tia…sparks, what kind of life is he going to live going forward? Put him out of his misery. He’d thank you for it.”

The line went dead, Knighthawk’s face vanishing. I sat there, trying to process everything that had happened tonight. Tia, Firefight, Prof’s face in the shadows. A patch of dark grey metal on the floor.

Eventually I put aside the mobile, then turned and—ignoring the protest of my splinted legs—pulled myself across the room until I was beside Megan. I rested my head on her chest and wrapped my arm around her, listening to her heartbeat until I finally, at long last, fell asleep.

PART FOUR

35

I woke up in a sweat. Again.

Those same images haunted me. Sounds garish and terrible. Harsh lights. Fear, terror, abandonment. None of the normal relief that came with waking from a nightmare. No comfort from the realization that it was only a dream.

These nightmares were different. They left me panicked. Raw, flayed, bruised, like a slab of meat in a boxing movie. After I awoke, I had to sit there on the floor—broken legs aching—for what seemed like an eternity before my pulse recovered.

Sparks. Something was *very* wrong with me.

At least I hadn't woken any of the others. Abraham and Cody slept on their pallets, and during the night sometime I'd found my way from Megan's pallet to my own, which the others had set out for me. Mizzy's was empty; she'd be on watch. I reached beside my pillow, where I was pleased to find my mobile—repaired by Mizzy—waiting for me.

Checking the mobile showed that it was six in the morning, and its light revealed a glass of water and several pills on a box set beside my pallet. I gulped them down, eager to get some painkillers into my system. After that, I pulled myself to a sitting position beside the wall, noticing for the first time that my side and arms ached as well. I'd done some real damage to my body during that mission.

I felt at my back and found a set of strange bruises shaped—best I could tell—like quarters. The growing pain of my legs and accumulated wounds was bad enough that I had to sit there for I don't know how long until the

meds started to kick in. Once I could think clearly, I started searching through my mobile. Abraham had forwarded the entire team the data package Tia had recovered, so I dug into it, trying not to worry whether I'd eventually have to wake up Abraham or Cody to take me to the restroom.

Regalia's writing was clear, careful, straightforward. I felt like I could hear her voice as I read. So certain, so calm, so *infuriating.* She'd stolen Prof from us in a deliberate, destructive act—just to sate her own lust for an immortal legacy.

Still, the reading was good. Regalia's plan was incredible. Audacious even; I couldn't help but feel a growing respect for her. As I'd guessed, Regalia had summoned Obliteration not because of his ability to destroy cities, but for his teleportation powers.

Her plot reached back some five years, but she'd eventually run up against a final and unanticipated deadline: her own mortality. Epic powers could not cure natural diseases. She had found herself terminal, and so she'd looked for a successor in Prof. Someone who could travel to Ildithia, make a motivator from Larcener, then teleport to Calamity and do the unthinkable.

Despite the plan's insane brilliance, it was filled with holes. By our best assumptions, Calamity was the source of all Epic powers. But who was to say that you could even steal his abilities in the first place? And if you did, wouldn't that simply replace Calamity with another host who acted exactly the same?

Still, at least this plan had been something to try—something to do other than accepting the world as it was. For that I respected Regalia, though I had been the one to kill her in the end.

Once done with Regalia's notes, I opened a set of photos. Past the maps of Ildithia, I found several shots of Calamity. The first three were pictures through a telescope. These were indistinct; I'd seen shots like them before. They made Calamity look like some kind of star.

The final image was different. I'd worried about what Knighthawk had said, that not all the images had made the transfer. I'd worried there wouldn't be any real pictures of Calamity.

But here one was, staring at me from the glowing screen in my hand. It wasn't a terribly good shot—I got the distinct impression of a covert photo snapped with a mobile—but it was obviously the Epic. A figure made of red light, though I couldn't tell if it was male or female. It seemed to be standing in a room, and all around it light reflected off odd angles and surfaces.

I searched through the files for anything similar, to no avail. Other shots of Calamity, if there had been any, were lost. Curiously, however, it appeared that Knighthawk had copied the *entire* memory of Tia's mobile, not just the new files from Regalia. Indeed, a folder simply labeled *Jonathan* glowed on my screen. I knew that I should probably leave it alone, that it was private, but I couldn't help myself. I thumbed into it and tapped on the first media file.

It was a video of Prof in a classroom.

I kept the sound low, but could still hear the enthusiasm in his voice as he took a lighter and moved down a line of eggs with holes in the top, setting them on fire. Students laughed and jumped as each egg popped in turn, exploding from the hydrogen Prof explained he'd filled them with.

Balloons went next, each flashing and popping in a different way as he went down the line. I didn't care much about the science involved; I was too focused on Prof. A younger Prof, with jet-black hair, only a few strands of grey. An enthusiastic Prof, who seemed to be enjoying every moment of this demonstration, despite the fact that he'd likely done it a hundred times.

He seemed like an entirely different person. I realized that in all our time together, I couldn't remember seeing Prof *happy.* Satisfied, yes. Eager. But truly happy? Not before this moment, watching him interact with students.

This was what we'd lost. I struggled to hold back my emotions as the video ended. The coming of Calamity had broken this world in more ways than one. Prof should have still been there, teaching those children.

Footsteps outside caused me to quickly wipe my eyes. Mizzy peeked in a moment later, then held up something the size of a basketball, with rotor blades on top. One of Knighthawk's drones.

"The guy works fast," she said, setting it down. Abraham and Cody stirred; they'd likely asked to be woken up when the thing arrived. Megan turned over, and for a moment I thought she was going to wake too. But she fell back asleep, snoring softly.

As Mizzy set down the drone, Cody and Abraham turned on their mobiles, lighting the room further. I watched as Mizzy twisted the top half of the device off, revealing a compartment, and pulled out a box that looked a lot like the harmsway we'd used in Newcago. Prof had apparently developed his fake to look like the real thing.

"Nice," Abraham said, rubbing his eyes.

"I'm surprised you convinced him to send it, David," Mizzy said as she set it aside.

Cody yawned. "Either way, let's get that puppy hooked up and running. The sooner David's legs are working, the sooner we can be out of this city."

"Out of this city?" I said.

The other three looked at me.

"You…intend to stay, then?" Abraham said, careful. "David, Tia is dead, and your theory—smart though it was—proved false. Confronting Prof with his weakness did not turn him away from his current course."

"Yeah, lad," Cody said. "It was a good run, but we know what he's trying to accomplish here, and we *do* have a way to stop it. We slip away with Larcener, and his plot can never work."

"That's assuming we *want* it not to work," Mizzy added.

"Mizzy," I said, surprised. "He's trying to become the ultimate Epic!"

"So?" she said. "I mean, how does our life change if he takes Calamity's place? There's no doomsday coming—no 'Imma destroy the world, kids' or anything like that. So far as I can see, all he wants to do is kill a couple of Epics. Sounds toasty to me."

"I suggest," Abraham said softly, "that you do not say such things where we might be overheard."

Mizzy winced and checked over her shoulder. "All I'm saying is that there isn't a *reason* for us to be here, now that we know what Prof's up to."

"And where do we go, Mizzy?" I asked.

"I don't know. How about we start with a place *other* than the city inhabited by a guy determined to kill us?"

I could see that the other two agreed, at least in part.

"Guys, the reason we came here in the first place hasn't changed," I said. "Prof still needs us. The *world* still needs us. Have you forgotten the point of our mission? We *need* to find a way to convert Epics, not just kill them. Otherwise we might as well give up now."

"But, lad," Cody said, "Abraham is right. Your plan to turn Prof didn't work."

"*That* attempt didn't work," I said. "But there are logical reasons why it might be the case. Maybe he didn't see Tavi as having *his* powers—he saw them as belonging to another Epic; similar, but different. So confronting her

wasn't confronting his abilities."

"Or," Abraham said, "Tia was wrong about his weakness."

"No," I said. "The fight with Tavi did negate his powers. She could destroy his forcefields, and he couldn't heal from wounds her attacks caused. Like Steelheart could be hurt only by someone who didn't fear him, Prof can be hurt only by someone wielding his own powers."

"This is all irrelevant, regardless," Abraham said. "You said that Megan summoned this woman because she could not find an actual version of Prof. Her powers are limited then, and this was our sole method of making him face himself."

"Not necessarily," I said, fishing in my pocket and taking out the cell incubator device. I rolled it across the ground to Mizzy, who picked it up.

"Is this…," she said.

"Tissue sample from Prof," I said.

Cody whistled softly.

"We *can* make him face himself, Abraham," I said. "We can do it literally by creating motivators using his own cells. Knighthawk already has a prototype ready from years ago."

The others fell silent.

"Look," I said. "We *need* to give this another try."

"He's going to persuade us," Mizzy said. "It's kinda what he does."

"Yes," Abraham agreed, motioning for her to roll him the tissue sample. He picked it up. "I won't argue with you further, David. If you believe it worth another attempt, we will support you." He turned the tissue sample over in his fingers. "But I don't like giving this to Knighthawk. It feels like… like a betrayal of Prof."

"More of a betrayal than him killing members of his own team?"

The comment quieted the room, like a sudden shout of "Who wants extra bacon?" at a bar mitzvah.

Mizzy took the tissue sample back from Abraham, then placed it in the drone. "I'll go release this while it's still dark," she said, standing. Cody joined her; he was next on watch. The two slipped out, while Abraham picked up the harmsway, then walked over to me.

"Megan first," I said.

"Megan is unconscious, David," he said. "A state that might not be caused merely by her wounds from the fire and the fall. I suggest that we first

heal the person we know will return to fighting readiness."

I sighed. "All right."

"Very wise."

"You should be leading this team, Abraham," I said as he wrapped the diodes of the harmsway around the exposed skin of my feet and ankles. "We both know it. Why did you refuse?"

"You do not ask this question of Cody," Abraham said.

"Because Cody is a loon. You have experience, you're calm in a fight, you're decisive….Why put me in charge?"

Abraham continued working, switching on the device, which caused a fuzzy feeling in my legs, like I'd slept on them wrong. If my wound back at the Foundry was any guide, this device—created from some unknown Epic—wouldn't be as efficient as using Prof's powers had been. It might take some time to heal me fully.

"I was JTF2," Abraham said. "Cansofcom."

"Which is…what exactly? Other than a strange jumble of letters."

"Canadian special forces."

"I knew it!"

"Yes, you are very smart."

"Was that…sarcasm?"

"Smart again," Abraham said.

I eyed him. "If you were military," I said, "that makes it even *stranger* you haven't taken command. Were you an officer?"

"Yes."

"High rank?"

"High enough."

"And…"

"You know Powder?"

"Epic," I said. "Could cause gunpowder and unstable materials to explode just by looking at them. He…" I swallowed, remembering a point from my notes. "He tried to conquer Canada, second year A.C. Attacked their military bases."

"Killed my whole team when he hit Trenton," Abraham said, standing up. "Everyone but me."

“Why not you?”

“I was in the stockade awaiting court-martial.” He eyed me. “I appreciate your enthusiasm and your grit, but you are young, yet, to understand the world as much as you think you do.” He raised his fingers to me in salute, then walked away.

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I scraped the wall of our under-bridge hideout, easily breaking off salt and rubbing it between my fingers. Time to move again. Though we'd always considered this to be an interim hideout, it felt like we'd barely gotten here. It left me feeling transient. How could anyone get a sense of *home* in this city?

I crossed the room, stretching my now-healed legs. They still ached—though I hadn't admitted that to the others—but I felt sturdy and strong. It had only taken a few hours in the night; I'd been ready by the time dawn arrived.

Megan's arm and bruises had also been healed. The harmsway worked on her, blessedly. I'd been worried about that since in Newcago, she couldn't be healed or use the tensors. Both of those abilities, however, had secretly come from Prof—and as Knighthawk had said, sometimes the abilities of specific Epics interfered with one another.

Well, this harmsway had worked, but she still hadn't woken up. Abraham told me not to be concerned; he said it wasn't uncommon for someone to spend a day or two in bed following something so traumatic. He was trying to comfort me. How could anyone know what was or wasn't normal when it came to an Epic overextending their powers?

Mizzy's head popped out of the storage room. "Hey, slontze. Knighthawk is ticked at you. Check your phone."

I dug out my mobile, which had been muffled from being in the bottom of my bag. Forty-seven messages. Calamity! What had gone wrong? I scrambled to open the messenger. Maybe the cells hadn't taken. Or the drone had been shot down by a wandering Epic. Or Knighthawk had decided to

switch sides on us.

Instead, I was treated to the sight of forty-seven messages of Knighthawk saying things like *Hey* or *Yo* or *Hey, you. Idiot.*

I quickly messaged him. *Is something wrong?*

Your didgeridooing face, the message came back.

The cells, I sent. *They're broken?*

Exactly how does one BREAK cells, kid?

I don't know, I sent back. *You're the one sending emergency texts to me!*

Emergency? Knighthawk sent. *I'm just bored.*

I blinked, holding my phone and rereading that text.

Bored? I sent. *You're literally spying on the entire world, Knighthawk. You can read anyone's mail, listen to anyone's phone calls.*

First, it's not the whole world, he wrote. *Only large chunks of North and Central America. Second, do you have any idea how mind-numbingly DULL most people are?*

I started a reply, but a flurry of messages came at me, interrupting what I was going to say.

Oh! Knighthawk wrote. *Look at this pretty flower!*

Hey. I want to know if you like me, but I can't say that, so here's an awkward flirtation instead.

Where are you?

I'm here.

Where?

Here.

There?

No, here.

Oh.

Look at my kid.

Look at my dog.

Look at me.

Look at me holding my kid and dog.

Hey, everyone. I took a huge koala this morning.

Barf. The world is ruled by deific beings who can do stuff like melt buildings into puddles of acid, and all people can think of to do with their

phones is take pictures of their pets and try to figure out how to get laid.

*Well…*I wrote to test if his diatribe was done yet. *The people who can afford your mobiles are the privileged rich. You shouldn't be surprised they're shallow.*

Nah, he wrote back. *There are more than a few cities like Newcago, where the ruling Epics are clever enough to realize that a population with mobiles is a population they can propagandize and control. I can tell you, the poor are just as bad. Except their pets are mangier.*

Is there a point to this? I asked.

Yeah. Entertaining me. Say something stupid. I've got popcorn and everything.

I sighed, tucking away the mobile and returning to my work—going over the list of Epics who, according to rumors in the city today, had died as a result of Prof's tantrum at Sharp Tower. There had been dozens of them at the party, and very few of them had flight powers or prime invincibilities. He'd killed off half of Ildithia's upper class.

My mobile buzzed again. I groaned, but glanced at it.

Hey, Knighthawk said. *My drones did a flyby on your city. You want the pictures or what?*

Pictures? I wrote back.

Yeah. For the imager. You've got one, right?

You know about the imager?

Kid, I MADE that thing.

It's Epic technology?

Of course it is, he said. *What, you think projectors that magically render near-three-dimensional images on irregular surfaces, without causing shadows from the people inside, are NATURAL?*

I honestly had no idea. But if he was offering a scan of the city, I'd take it.

It's one of the few I managed to mass-produce, like the technology for your mobiles, Knighthawk added. *Most tech like this, it degrades significantly if you make more than one or two motivators from the cells. Not imagers though. Sparks—mobiles don't even NEED motivators, except the ones I keep here in the hub. Anyway, you want this imager file or not?*

I do, thanks, I wrote. *What's the progress on the motivators from Prof's cells?*

I've got to grow the culture a little first, he said. *Will take at least a day before we know if it all worked, and if I've made Jonathan into my motivator dingo or not.*

Great, I said. *Keep me up to date.*

Sure. So long as you promise to record yourself the next time you say something stupid. Damn, I miss the internet. You could always find people doing stupid stuff on the internet.

I sighed, pocketing the mobile. It, of course, beeped at me again a short time later. I grabbed it, annoyed and ready to tell off Knighthawk, but it was a notification saying my mobile had received a large data package. The scan of the city.

I didn't know much about technology, but I was able to tether the phone to the imager in the storage room, then transfer the file. When I turned on the machine, I found myself hovering above Ildithia. The grandeur of this was spoiled by the piles of supplies in the room, which also hovered in the sky, like I was some kind of magical space hobo who flew about with my possessions in tow.

I did a quick sweep through the city, using my hands to adjust the perspective, reacquainting myself with the controls. The imager faithfully reproduced Ildithia, and for a moment I let the illusion of it run away with me. I swooped past a skyscraper, the windows a blur on my right, then pulled up to soar down a street, passing saltstone trees. I wove between them in rapid succession, then shot through a park past our hideout.

I felt alive, thrilled, awake and alert. My incapacitation with broken legs had been brief, but it had still left me confined, controlled, *powerless.* Sparks…it felt like it had been years since I'd been able to walk in the open without fear of exposing my team.

I delighted in the freedom of flying around the city. Then I hit a building. I continued through it, the scenery blurring to a black jumble of nothing until I emerged from the other side.

That reminded me that this was a fabrication, a lie. Objects warped when I drew too close to them, and I could see the corners of the room if I looked hard.

Worse, no wind greeted me upon my leaps. No lurch in my stomach marked gravity's disapproval. I might as well have been watching a movie. There was no fun to this, no power. And it wasn't nearly wet enough.

“That looked fun,” Cody said from the doorway, which opened like a portal in the middle of the air. I hadn’t seen him approach.

I flattened my hands, lowering the camera view so I settled in place atop the small apartment building. “I miss the spyril.”

In all the running around, fighting, and fleeing we’d done lately, I hadn’t thought much about the device that had let me fly through the watery streets of Babilar. Now I recognized a hole inside me. For a short time in that drowned city, I’d known true freedom, powered by twin jets of water.

Cody chuckled, sauntering in. “I remember the first time you saw the imager work, lad. You looked like you were about to show us all what you’d eaten for lunch.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I took to it pretty quick though.”

“I suppose you did,” Cody said, joining me on the rooftop, then turning to look over the city. “You have a plan for us yet?”

“No,” I said. “Any thoughts?”

“Coming up with plans has never been my strong point.”

“Why not? Seems like you’re pretty good at making things up.”

He pointed at me. “I’ve punched men for wisecracks like that.” He paused. “Of course, most were Scots.”

“Your own kind?” I asked. “Why would you fight other Scots?”

“Lad, you don’t know much about us, do you?”

“Only what you’ve told me.”

“Well, I guess you know a heap of things then. Just none of them useful.” He smiled, looking out over the city, thoughtful. “Back when I was in the force, if we had to bring in someone dangerous, first thing we did was try to catch them alone.”

I nodded slowly. Cody had been a cop—that much about his stories I believed. “Alone,” I said. “So he wouldn’t be able to get help as easily?”

“More so we didn’t put people in danger,” Cody said. “Lots of people in this city. Good people. Survivors. What happened at Sharp Tower, that’s partly our fault. Sure, Prof melted the place, but *we* pushed him to do it. That’ll weigh on me the rest of my life—another brick in a pile that’s way too big.”

“So we try to fight him outside the city?”

Cody nodded. “If that idiot with the mannequin is right, then as soon as we use Prof’s powers, he’ll know where we are. We can pick the place to

fight, draw him to us."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah…"

"Except?" Cody asked.

"That's what we did with Steelheart," I said softly. "Drew him to our trap, away from the populace." I raised my hands to control the imager, moving us through the city toward the remnants of Sharp Tower. The drone flybys had happened right after dawn, and corpses still littered the site.

"Lifeline," I said, counting off the fallen Epics I spotted. "Minor electricity powers and telepathy. Darkness Infinity—that was her fourth name, by the way. She kept coming up with 'something better' and it was always worse. She could jump between shadows. Inshallah and the Thaub, from Bahrain. Both had linguistic powers—"

"*Linguistic* powers?" Cody asked.

"Hmm? Oh. One could force you to speak in rhyme. The other could speak in any made-up language anyone anywhere had imagined."

"That's…very strange."

"We don't talk much about the odd powers," I said absently. "But there are a lot of minor Epics whose abilities are very specific. It—" I froze. "Wait."

I spun us in the air, fast enough that Cody stumbled and reached out to touch the wall. I zoomed us down toward the rubble, picking out a bloodied face, the body trapped beneath the remnants of the tower's large generator. Prof's blast had vaporized only the salt. It was the first confirmation I'd had that he, with exquisite control over his powers, could release a blast that vaporized some dense materials but not others.

That wasn't important now. That face *was.*

"Oh, Calamity," I whispered.

"What?" Cody demanded.

"That's Stormwind."

"The one who…"

"Makes this city grow food," I finished. "Yeah. Ildithia's food production supplied dozens of other cities, Cody. Prof's little tirade might have some very lasting consequences."

I dug out my mobile and typed a message to Knighthawk.

How soon after an Epic dies do you need to freeze their cells?

Soon, he wrote back. *Most cells die quickly. CO2 poisoning, without the*

heart pumping blood. Epic DNA melts fast, in addition. We don't know the reason yet. Why do you ask?

I think Prof just started a famine, I wrote to him. *He killed an Epic last night who was vital to the economy.*

You can try to harvest me a sample, Knighthawk replied. *Some cells last longer than others. Skin cells…some stem cells…The DNA problem works on a kind of weird half-life, with most of it being gone in seconds, but some individual cells could linger. But kid, it's REALLY hard to get a culture going from old Epic cells.*

I showed the messages to Cody.

"It'll be dangerous to go out," he noted. "We don't have Megan to give us new faces."

"Yeah, but if we can prevent starvation, isn't it worth the risk?"

"Sure, sure," Cody said. "Unless we expose ourselves to Prof—who could very well have people watching those bodies—and then get ourselves killed. Which would leave only three Reckoners, instead of five, to confront him. Assuming he didn't torture our secrets out of us and then go kill the rest of the team. Which he probably would. All for a very, *very* slight chance that we might be able to make a motivator that *might* feed people."

I swallowed. "Right. Fine. You laid it on a bit thick."

"Yeah, well," he said. "Y'all've got a history of not listening to logic."

"Like your logic of modern rock and roll being derived from bagpipes?"

"That one's true, now," Cody said. "Look it up. Elvis was a Scot."

"Yeah, whatever," I said, walking over to switch off the imager and the view of Stormwind's face. It hurt, but today I would hold myself back.

A moment later, Mizzy poked her head into our room. "Hey," she said. "Your girlfriend's awake. Do you want to go smooch or—"

I was already on my way.

37

MEGAN was sitting up, holding a bottle of water in both hands, her back to the wall. I passed Abraham on my way in, and he nodded. According to his—admittedly limited—medical knowledge, she was fine. We'd unhooked the harmsway from her hours ago.

Megan gave me a wan smile and took a pull on her water bottle. The others left us alone, Abraham steering Cody away by the shoulder. I let out a long sigh of relief as I reached Megan. Despite Abraham's assurances, a piece of me had been terrified she wouldn't wake up. Yes, she could reincarnate if killed, but what if she didn't die, just slipped into a coma?

She cocked an eyebrow at my obvious relief. "I feel," she said, "like a barrel of green ducks at a Fourth of July parade."

I cocked my head, then nodded. "Oh, yeah. Good metaphor."

"David. That was supposed to be nonsense…a joke."

"Really? Because it makes perfect sense." I gave her a kiss. "See, you feel healed, and that's not right—like the ducks, thinking they're out of place. But *nobody's* truly out of place at a parade, so they simply fit in. Like you fit in here."

"You're absolutely mental," she said as I settled down beside her, my arm around her shoulders.

"How do you feel?"

"Awful."

"So the healing didn't take?"

"It did," she said, staring at the water bottle.

“Megan, it’s all right. Yes, the mission went awry. We lost Tia. We’re recovering from that. Moving forward.”

“I went dark, David,” she said softly. “Darker than I’ve been in a long time. Darker than when I killed Sam…darker than I’ve been since before meeting you.”

“You pulled out of it.”

“Barely,” she said, then glanced at her arm. “I was supposed to be past this. We were supposed to have figured it *all out.*”

I pulled her close, and she rested her head on my shoulder. I wished I knew what to say, but everything I thought of was stupid. She didn’t want false reassurances. She wanted answers.

So did I.

“Prof killed Tia,” Megan whispered. “I could end up doing the same to you. Did you hear her? At the end?”

“I’d hoped you were unconscious for that part,” I admitted.

“She said he’d warned her and she hadn’t listened. David…I’m warning you. I can’t control this, even with the secret of the weaknesses.”

“Well,” I said, “we’ll merely have to do the best we can.”

“But—”

“Megan,” I said, lifting her head to look her in the eyes. “I’d rather die than be without you.”

“You mean that?”

I nodded.

“Selfish,” she said. “Do you know what it would *do* to me to know that I’d killed you?”

“Then let’s see that it doesn’t happen, all right?” I said. “I don’t think it will—but I’ll risk it, to stay near you.”

She breathed out, then rested her head on my shoulder again. “Slontze.”

“Yeah. Thanks for trying my idea with Prof.”

“Sorry I wasn’t able to make it work.”

“Not your fault. I don’t think we want to try another dimensional version of him.”

“What then?” she asked. “We can’t just give up.”

I smiled. “I’ve got an idea.”

“How crazy is it?”

"Pretty darn crazy."

"Good," she said. "The world's gone mad; joining it is the only solution." She was quiet a moment. "Do…I have a part in it?"

"Yes, but we shouldn't need you to overextend your powers."

She relaxed, snuggling against my side, and we sat there together for a time. "You know," I finally said, "I really wish my father could have met you."

"Because he'd be curious to meet a good Epic?"

"Well, that too," I said. "But I think he'd like you."

"David, I'm abrasive, cocky, and loud."

"And brilliant," I said, "and an awesome shot. Commanding. Decisive. My dad, he liked people who were straightforward. Said he'd rather get cussed out by someone who meant it than be smiled at by someone who didn't."

"Sounds like a great man."

"He was." The kind of man others ignored or talked over because he was too quiet, and not quick with something clever—but also the kind of man who would run to help others when everyone else fled for safety.

Calamity, I missed that man.

"I've been having nightmares," I whispered.

Megan sat up, looking at me with a sharp motion. "What kind?"

"Persistent," I said. "Terrible. Something about loud noises, jarring sensations. I don't get it—I don't think it's something I'm afraid of."

"Any…other oddities?" she asked.

I met her gaze. "How much do you remember from Sharp Tower?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Tia's words. And before that…gunfire. Lots of it. How did we survive that?"

I drew my lips to a line.

"Sparks!" she said. "How likely do you think…I mean…"

"I don't know," I said. "Could be nothing. There were a lot of powers being flung around that room—maybe there was a leftover forcefield, or…or maybe some pocket of another reality…"

She rested her hand on my shoulder.

"Sure *you* want to stay around *me*?" I asked.

"I'd rather die than do otherwise." She squeezed my shoulder. "But I

don't like this at all, David. It feels like we're holding our breath, waiting to see who explodes first. Do you think Prof and Tia had conversations like this, where they decided it was worth the risk of remaining together?"

"Maybe. But I don't see that we have any option but to proceed. I'm not going to leave you, and you're not going to leave me. It's like I said. We have to accept the danger."

"Unless there's another way," Megan said. "A way to make sure I'm not a danger to you, or to anyone else, ever again."

I frowned, uncertain what she meant. But she seemed to decide something, looking at me, and she lifted her hand to caress my face. "You can't say you haven't considered it," she said softly.

" 'It'?"

"The entire time he's been here," Megan said, "I've wondered. Is this my way out?"

"Megan, I don't understand."

She stood up. "It's not enough to make promises. It's not enough to *hope* I won't end up hurting you." She turned and strode, unsteadily at first, from the room.

I scrambled to my feet and followed, trying to sort out what she was planning. Salt scuffed under our feet as we walked past a table in the main room where the others sat; this building's time had come, as it was too near to the trailing edge of Ildithia. It wouldn't last the night.

Megan crossed the room and walked into Larcener's smaller chamber. Sparks! I jogged after her, stumbling into the room. There was a way to make sure Megan never hurt anyone with her powers again. It was here, inside our base.

"Megan," I said, seizing her by the arm. "Are you sure you want to do something so drastic?"

She studied Larcener, who lay on a plush couch with his headphones on. He didn't notice us.

"Yes," she whispered. "During my time with you, I've started to lose my hatred of the powers. I started to think it could be controlled. But after the things that happened last night…I don't want this anymore, David."

She looked to me questioningly.

I shook my head. "I won't stop you. This is your choice. But maybe we should think about it some more?"

“This from you?” she said with a grim smile. “No. I might lose my nerve.” She strode up to Larcener, and when he didn’t notice her, she kicked at his foot, which was dangling over the side of his couch.

He immediately pulled off his headphones and scrambled up. “You *drudge,*” he snapped. “Useless peasant. I’ll—”

Megan thrust her arm toward him, wrist upward. “Take my powers.”

Larcener gaped, then backed away from her, regarding the arm like one might regard a ticking box with the words *NOT A BOMB* stenciled on it. “What are you babbling about?”

“My powers,” Megan said, stepping toward him. “Take them. They’re yours.”

“You’re insane.”

“No,” she said, “just tired. Go ahead.”

He didn’t reach for her arm. I strongly suspected that no Epic had ever *offered* to give him their powers before. I stepped up to Megan.

“I spent months in Babilar serving Regalia,” Megan said to Larcener, “all because of the implication that she could make Calamity remove my powers. I wish I’d known about you; I would simply have come here. *Take them.* They’ll make you immortal.”

“I’m already immortal,” he snapped.

“Then be double immortal,” Megan said. “Or quadruple, or whatever. Take them, or I’ll reach into another dimension, and I’ll—”

He grabbed her arm. She gasped, jerking upright, but didn’t pull her arm away. I steadied her by her shoulders, worried. Sparks. Watching her was one of the hardest things I’d ever done. Should I have persuaded her to wait? To think it over?

“Like ice water,” she hissed, “in my veins.”

“Yes,” Larcener said. “I’ve heard it is unpleasant.”

“Now it’s become *fire*!” Megan said, trembling. “Pouring through me!” Her eyes went glassy and unfocused.

“Hmm…,” Larcener said, his tone like that of a careful surgeon. “Yes…”

Megan jerked, growing tense, staring into the distance.

“Perhaps you should have thought this through before prancing in here and making demands,” Larcener said. “Enjoy being even *more* of a peasant. I’m sure you’ll fit in brilliantly with this crew, if you can even think straight

when this is done. Most can't, you see—"

The room caught fire.

I ducked as ribbons of flame lanced across the ceiling, then down the walls. The heat was distant, subtle, but I *could* feel it.

Megan stood up straight, and her trembling ended.

Larcener let go, then looked at his hands. He seized Megan again, sneering, and she met his eyes. There was no trembling this time, no jerk of pain, though her face tightened as she clenched her jaw.

The flames didn't go away. They were a phantom burning. She'd said that she'd learned to create those dimensional shadows to help hide her weakness and her fear of fire. They came out by instinct.

The room started to grow very hot.

Larcener let go of her hand and backed away.

"You can't take them, it seems," Megan said.

"How?" he demanded. "How do you defy me?"

"I don't know," Megan said. "But I was wrong to come here."

She turned and strode from the room. I followed her, confused. Abraham and Mizzy stood at the doorway, and Megan brushed past them. I gave them a shrug as I followed her into the communal bedroom.

"You really still have the powers?" I asked her.

She nodded, looking tired. She slumped down onto her pallet. "I should have guessed it wouldn't be so easy."

I knelt beside her, hesitant, but also relieved. That had been a roller coaster of emotions—the type that was old and rickety and didn't have proper seat belts.

"You…all right?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I don't understand it either. It was strange, David—in that moment, with him sucking my abilities out in that wave of ice, I realized…that the powers are as much *me* now as my personality." She closed her eyes. "I realized I couldn't give them to him. If I did, I'd become a coward."

"But how did you defy him?" I said. "I've never heard of something like that happening."

"The powers are *mine,*" she whispered. "I claim them. *My* burden, *my* task, *my self.* I don't know why that mattered, but it did." She opened her eyes. "So what now?"

“When we were at Sharp Tower,” I said, “I visited the other world. The one where Firefight lives. There’s no darkness there, Megan. *Steelheart* is a hero.”

“So we got born one dimensional degree away from paradise.”

“We’ll just have to bring paradise here,” I told her. “Regalia’s plan was for Prof to travel to Calamity and, once there, steal his powers. If we can get Prof back, he’ll give us the teleportation device she developed. Seems like that would give us a pretty good opportunity to kill Calamity and free us all.”

She smiled and took me by the arm. “Let’s do it. Rescue Prof, bring down Calamity, save the world. What’s your plan?”

“Well,” I said, “it’s not fully formed yet.”

“Good,” she said. “You have great ideas, David, but your execution is crap. Go grab some paper. We’re going to come up with a way to pull this off.”

38

I set down my pack in the center of the large, open building. The place had a sharp salty scent. Newly grown. The floor reflected my mobile's light; polished white saltstone. After leaving behind a hideout that had literally been decomposing around us, this place felt almost *too* clean. Like a baby the moment before it barfed on you.

"This feels wrong," I said, my voice echoing in the large chamber.

"In what way?" Mizzy said, passing with a sack of supplies over her shoulder.

"It's too big," I said. "I can't feel like I'm hiding if I have a whole *warehouse* to live in."

"One would think," Abraham said, setting down his supplies with a clink, "you would be happy to escape the tight confines of our previous dwellings."

I turned around and felt distinctly creeped out that—by the frail light of my mobile—I couldn't see the edges of the room. How could I explain that sensation without sounding silly? Every Reckoner hideout had been tucked away and secure. This empty warehouse was the opposite.

Cody claimed it would be secure anyway. Our time in Ildithia had let him and Abraham do some investigating, and they'd come up with this warehouse as a spot nobody used, and one that was convenient to a spot I wanted to use in our plan to attack Prof.

I shook my head, grabbing my pack and lugging it across the room to the far wall, where Abraham and Mizzy had set theirs. Nearby, Cody had already started growing a smaller room inside the warehouse. He worked

carefully with a gloved hand, stroking the salt outward like he was sculpting clay, using the trowel to make smooth surfaces. His glove hummed softly, making the crystal structure of the salt extend behind his motions. He'd only been working for about an hour, but he already had a good start on the smaller chamber.

"Ain't nobody gonna bother us here, lad," Cody said in a reassuring voice as he worked.

"Why not?" I asked. "Seems like a perfect place to hole up a large group of people." I could imagine the warehouse filled with families, each around their own trash can fire. That would transform it. Rather than being tomblike and empty, it would be full of sounds and life.

"This place is too far away from the city center—it's from the northern edge of the section of old Atlanta that became Ildithia. Why pick the cold warehouse when you can have a group of townhomes for your family?"

"I suppose that makes sense," I said.

"Plus, a whole bunch of people got murdered in here," Cody added. "So nobody wants to be near the place."

"Um…what?"

"Yeah," he said, "tragic event. Bunch of kids started playing here, but it was too close to another family's territory. The other family got spooked, thought rivals were moving in on them, so they tossed some dynamite through the door. They say you could hear the survivors crying under the rubble for days, but a full-on war had started by then, and nobody had time to come help the poor kids."

I regarded him, stunned. Cody started whistling and continued to work. Sparks. He had to be making that story up, right? I turned and took in the vast, empty room, then shivered.

"I hate you," I muttered.

"Ach, now, don't be like that. Ghosts are drawn to negative emotions, you see."

I should have known better; talking to Cody was generally among the *least* productive things you could do. I went looking for Megan instead, passing Larcener, who—of course—had refused to help carry anything to the new base. He swept into Cody's unfinished chamber and flopped down, an overstuffed beanbag materializing beneath him.

"I'm tired of being interrupted," he said, pointing at the wall. A door appeared, propped up against it. "Work that into your construction, and I'll

put a lock on the thing. Oh, and make the walls *extra* thick so I don't have to listen to the lot of you squeaking and babbling all the time."

Cody gave me a long-suffering look, and somehow I could tell that he was contemplating walling the Epic up.

I found Megan with Mizzy, near where Abraham was unpacking his guns. I held back, surprised. Megan and Mizzy sat on the floor surrounded by our notes—some in my careful hand, others in her…well, Megan's handwriting could be mistaken for the aftermath of a tornado in a pencil store.

Mizzy nodded as Megan pointed at one page, then gestured wildly at the sky. Megan thought a moment, then huddled over the paper and started writing.

I sidled up to Abraham. "The two of them are talking," I said.

"You expected maybe clucking?"

"Well, shouting. Or strangulation."

Abraham turned back to unloading equipment from his bags.

I started toward the women, but Abraham took me by the arm without looking up. "Perhaps it would be best to simply let them be, David."

"But—"

"They are adults," Abraham said. "They do not need you to work out their problems."

I folded my arms, huffing. What did their being adults have to do with it? Plenty of adults *did* need me to work out their problems—otherwise Steelheart would still be alive. Besides, Mizzy was seventeen. Did that even count as an adult?

Abraham removed something from one of the packs and set it down with a soft thump. "Instead of poking where you aren't needed," he said to me, "how about helping where you *are*? I could use your aid."

"Doing what?"

Abraham lifted the top of the box, revealing a pair of gloves and a jug of sparkling mercury. "Your plan is daring, as I would expect. It is also simple. The best often are. But it *does* require me to do things I am not sure I can do."

He was right; the plan was simple. It was also *exceptionally dangerous.*

Knighthawk had used drones to explore a few of the caverns underneath

Ildithia, the ones Digzone had created long ago. There were many under the region, tunneled into the rock here. Ildithia was passing over a large set of them, and we'd chosen this warehouse in part because here we could dig down into one of the caverns and practice there.

Our plan was to train for a month. By then Ildithia would have left these caverns behind—but they would still make a perfect location for a trap. Lots of tunnels, places to set up explosives or to plot escape routes. We'd be familiar with the tunnels, which would give us an edge in the fight.

Once we were ready, we'd sneak from the city and go back to the caves. From there we could lure Prof out. All it would take was using the motivators based on his powers, and he'd come right to us. Ildithia would be miles away, and safe from whatever destruction happened during our fight.

Abraham and Megan would hit him first. The idea was to wear him down before revealing Cody, wearing the full "tensor suit," as we were calling the set of devices that mimicked Prof's power portfolio. It hadn't arrived yet, but Knighthawk claimed it was on its way. So once Abraham and Megan had worn Prof down a little, Cody would appear, manifesting all of Prof's powers.

We had to hope that Tavi's power hadn't been recognized by Prof as being "his." After all, her forcefields had been a different color.

A piece of me whispered that there might be a larger problem. Prof had been wounded by Tavi's forcefields, but they hadn't shut down his powers completely, like what happened with Megan and most Epics.

Could Tia have been wrong? I'd decided that she wasn't, but now—confronted with one last shot at stopping Prof—I wavered. Some things about Prof and his powers didn't add up.

What *was* it that Prof feared?

"For this to work," Abraham said from beside me, snapping me out of my introspection, "I will need to be able to use the rtich to face Prof. And facing him will require not getting squished by his forcefields."

"The rtich should be enough," I said. "The structural integrity of the mercury will be—"

"I believe your notes," Abraham cut me off, pulling on the gloves. "But I'd still rather do some testing, followed by *much* practice."

I shrugged. "What did you have in mind?"

—

What he "had in mind," apparently, was to put me to work. Our warehouse had a little loft inside it. I spent the next hour working with Cody, who created some large slabs of saltstone in the loft. I then lashed these together and positioned them, in several bunches, ready to push them off the loft.

Finally, I wiped my brow with a rag that was already soaked through, then settled down with my legs hanging over the ledge.

Below, Abraham practiced.

He'd developed his own training regimen with the rtich, based on some old martial art. He stepped into the center of a ring of lights he'd set out on the ground, thrust his hands to one side, then pulled them back and thrust them the other way.

Mercury danced around him. At first it covered his arm, like a silvery sleeve and glove. As he thrust his hands forward, it sprayed outward, becoming a disc connected to his palm. When he moved back into his martial arts motions, it withdrew and covered his arm again, then shot into the shape of a spike as he thrust his hands the other way.

I watched hungrily. The metal moved with a beautiful, otherworldly flow, reflecting light as it snaked around Abraham's arms—first one, then across his shoulders to the other, like something alive. He turned and ran, then leaped—and the mercury coursed down his legs, becoming a short pillar that Abraham landed upon. It held his weight, though it looked spindly and frail.

"Ready?" I called from above.

"Ready," he called.

"Be careful," I said. "I don't want this crushing you."

He gave no response, so I sighed, then stood and used a crowbar to pry one of the large, lashed-together slabs of saltstone off the loft and send it tumbling toward him. The idea was for him to create a thin line of mercury in the path of the falling slabs, then see how much the impact twisted the mercury.

Instead, Abraham stepped directly into the path of the stones and raised his hand.

My view was obstructed, but best I could figure, Abraham caused the mercury to run up his side and arm—becoming a long ribbon that extended from his palm, down his side, and to his feet to form a kind of brace.

My breath caught as the saltstone plummeted toward him. I craned my neck to look down, and the pile hit *hard,* bouncing off Abraham, the lashings

snapping. The slabs crashed to the sides, revealing Abraham grinning below, his hand still raised, his palm coated with mercury. The brace had been enough to deflect the weight of the slabs.

"That was foolhardy," I called to him. "Stop trying to put me out of a job!"

"Better to know now if this will work," he called back to me, "than to find out in the middle of a fight with Prof. Besides, I was relatively certain."

"Still want to try this next part?" Cody asked, coming up beside me, sniper rifle on his shoulder.

"Yes, please," Abraham said, thrusting his hand toward us and making the shield. It grew as large as he was, shimmering and incredibly thin.

I looked at Cody, then shrugged and put my hands over my ears. A series of shots followed; fortunately they were suppressed, so the ear-holding wasn't as necessary as it might have been.

The mercury puckered, *catching* the bullets. Or, well, it stopped them—which upon consideration wasn't all that impressive, as bodies technically did *that* all the time. Mine had done so on occasion.

Still, the mercury didn't tear or split, so it was an effective shield, though unfortunately the application was limited. Abraham didn't have superhuman reflexes; he wouldn't be able to stop bullets already fired.

He turned and the mercury flowed back to him, scattering the bullets to the floor. It ran down his arm and then his leg before streaking from his feet to form a series of steps rising toward me. He walked up them, grinning widely.

I shoved down my envy. I doubted I'd ever stop wishing I had been able to make this device work, but I *could* avoid acting childish about it. Cody and I clapped Abraham on the shoulder, giving him a thumbs-up. The Canadian man bore an uncharacteristic smile of pleasure, which was good to see. It wasn't that he never smiled, it was just that his smiles always seemed so controlled. He rarely seemed to enjoy life. It was more that he let it pass around him, regarding it curiously, like a rock watching a river.

"Maybe this will actually work," he said to me. "Maybe we won't all end up dead." He held up his hand and the mercury ran up his arm, pooling in a sphere above his gloved palm. It rippled and shook like a miniature ocean with waves and a tide.

"Do a puppy next!" Mizzy called from below. "Oh! Then a hat. Make

me a silver hat. A *tiara.*"

"Shut it, you," Abraham called.

My pocket buzzed. I pulled out my mobile, finding yet another text from Knighthawk. The guy considered me his personal entertainment factory. I flipped the message open.

Jonathan contacted me again today.

He's discovered you sent him on a wild rat chase?

Rat?

I've never seen a goose, I wrote back to him. *Don't know why you'd chase one. But Newcago has lots of rats.*

And you'd chase those instead?…Never mind. Kid, Jonathan sent a message to me. For you.

I felt cold, then waved for Abraham and Cody to step over and read along with me.

He said, Knighthawk continued, *that you have two days to turn over Larcener to him, or he'll destroy Newcago. Every single person in it. Then Babilar the next day.*

Abraham and I shared a look.

Do you think he could actually do that? Knighthawk wrote.*Destroy a whole city?*

"Yes," Abraham said softly. "If he killed Tia, he's capable of anything."

"I think he's asking if Prof has the *power* to do it," I said.

"Didn't you say you talked to Obliteration at the party?" Abraham asked.

"Yeah. And he implied that Prof had summoned him by using a device linked to Obliteration's powers. Even though Regalia made the bombs to hide her true goal—the teleportation device—I think it's safe to assume Prof has access to at least one bomb."

"He has the capability," Abraham said. "And we have to assume he'll do it. Which means…"

"…we have a new deadline," I said, tucking away the mobile.

So much for our month of preparation.

39

THE drone landed on our warehouse roof that night. Four of us waited in a silent huddle, cloaked in darkness, while Cody scanned the city from inside a sniper nest he'd made on the rooftop nearby.

I reached into my pocket and clicked a button on my mobile; its screen went dark. The click sent a message I'd prepared earlier: *Drone has landed the prize. We're inspecting it now.*

We knelt over the drone, night-vision goggles in place, looking at a world painted green. Mizzy pulled the drone open.

Inside, packed in straw mixed with old newspapers, was a glorious sight: a vest, a small metal box, and a pair of gloves. I breathed out. Those gloves looked exactly like the tensors—black, with lines of metal running like tiny rivers up the fingers and pooling at each tip. Those would glow green when engaged.

"Niiiice," Mizzy whispered, poking at the vest. "Three different motivator casings. The first one offers healing, judging by the sensors you attach to the skin; it probably activates automatically upon injury. This one is connected to the tensors. Last one for forcefields."

She turned over one of the gloves. I couldn't help feeling that this suit represented something new, a different step in the creation of Epic-derived technology. Instead of one lone power, this replicated everything Prof could do. A complex network of wires and multiple motivators, combined in an imitation of an enhanced human. Should I be disturbed or impressed?

Heroes will come, son. My father's words. I thought of that as I ran my fingers along the sleek metal of the suit's motivators. *But sometimes, you*

have to help them along….

"There is a problem with this," Abraham said. "Cody cannot practice with this device without alerting Prof that he's using it, and therefore revealing ourselves to him."

"I've got an idea for that," I said. "Though it will require Megan to use her powers."

She looked up at me, curious.

"I doubt Prof can sense Cody practicing," I said, "if he's in another dimension."

"Clever," she said. "He'll only be able to stay a short time though. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes, if I push it."

"Don't push it," I said. "It might not give us much time, but at least we'll be able to make sure the motivators are working."

Everyone seemed to like this plan, and together we dug out the tensor suit. Beneath were some other supplies that we'd managed to beg off Knighthawk: some explosives, some tiny drones that were little more than cameras with feet, and some technological gizmos Mizzy had suggested as additions to Megan's and my plan.

The others carted all this away, Mizzy placing the old harmsway in the drone—the one that had healed Megan and me—and sending it off to return to Knighthawk. We had something better now, though we'd have to be careful about using it lest we alert Prof.

I caught Megan by the arm as the team passed, carrying the goodies. She nodded to me. She felt all right about using her powers. I didn't follow her into the warehouse below, but instead walked over to Cody's sniper nest. It was my turn to be on watch.

The nest was shaped like a wide, shallow box near the center of the roof. Cody had devised a ceiling for it with the crystal grower that merged right into the roof and made the structure look like another normal building feature. It had slits on all sides, however, and a large enough hole at the rear for you to crawl in and lie down.

I peeked in; the lanky Southerner was cuddled into the hole like a joey in its mother's pouch—though people really shouldn't let baby kangaroos play with a Barrett .50 cal with armor-piercing rounds.

"Has my new toy arrived?" Cody asked, setting aside the gun and wriggling backward out of the nest.

"Yeah," I said, stepping out of his way as he stood up. "It looks great."

"You sure you don't want to pilot it, lad?"

I shook my head. "You have more experience with the tensors, Cody."

"Yeah, but you were way more talented with them."

"I…" I swallowed. "No, I need to be running the mission from behind."

"Right, then," he said, turning toward the steps down to the building.

"Cody?" I said, and he stopped, turned back. "The other day I was talking to Abraham and…well, he kind of bit my head off."

"Ah. You were poking around, were you?"

"Poking around?"

"In his past."

"No, of course not. I just asked why he didn't want to be in charge."

"Close enough," Cody said, patting me on the arm. "Abraham's a strange one, lad. The rest of us, we make sense. You fight for revenge. I fight because I was a cop, and I took an oath. Mizzy, she fights because of her heroes, people like Val and Sam. She wants to be like them.

"Abraham though…why does he fight? I couldn't tell you. Because of his fallen brothers and sisters in the special forces? Maybe, but he doesn't seem to be holding a grudge. Maybe to protect the country? But if that's the case, why's he down here in the Fractured States? All I've been able to figure is that he doesn't want to talk about it—and you shouldn't assume he's gentle because he's in control, lad." Cody rubbed his jaw. "Learned that the hard way once."

"He *punched* you?"

"Broke my jaw," Cody said with a laugh. "Don't poke, kid. That's what I learned!" He seemed not to care much, though a broken jaw sounded like a pretty big offense to me.

But then, who *hadn't* wanted to punch Cody on occasion?

"Thanks," I said, sitting down to begin wiggling into the sniper nest. "But you're wrong about me, Cody. I don't fight for revenge, not anymore. I fight for my father."

"Isn't that the same as revenge?"

I reached into my shirt and took out the small S-shaped symbol of the Faithful that I wore around my neck. The mark of one who awaited a day when the heroes would come. "No. I don't fight because of his death, Cody. I fight for his dreams."

Cody nodded. “Good on ya, lad,” he said, turning to walk to the steps. “Good on ya.”

I crawled into the sniper nest, head brushing the low ceiling, and lifted Cody’s rifle, patching my mobile into it. I pulled off my night-vision goggles and used the gun’s scope instead—it had an overlaid map of the area, as well as thermal imaging. Better than either, the rifle had an advanced sound-detection system. It would alert me if it heard anything nearby, creating a small blip on my map.

At the moment, nothing. Not even pigeons.

I lay there positioned on cushions Cody had left. Occasionally I would twist about in the square enclosure, poking my rifle out one of the other sides.

Sounds came from below, inside the warehouse. I checked in with the others, and Mizzy said that my idea—sending Cody into the parallel dimension to practice—was working. Said he had to frighten some kids away over there, who were living in the warehouse in that dimension, but otherwise he hadn’t encountered anyone.

I checked on an oddity after that—noise the rifle had picked up—but it turned out to be a few scavengers moving through the alleyway. They didn’t stop at our warehouse. Instead they continued on toward the outskirts of the city. This let me have an extended period alone to think. My mind wandered in the silence, and I realized something was nagging at me. I was dissatisfied, though annoyingly I couldn’t figure out exactly *why*. Something bothered me, either about the place we’d set up or the plan we’d made. What was I missing?

I mulled it all over for about an hour—only a fraction of my shift—and was actually glad when the alarm on my gun buzzed again. I zoomed in on the source of the disturbance, but it was just a feral cat scampering along a rooftop nearby. I watched it carefully, in case it was some kind of shapeshifting Epic.

By this time light had dawned on the horizon, and I yawned, licking my lips and tasting salt. I wouldn’t be sad to be away from this place. Unfortunately my watch was a full eight hours, which would include another six hours of dullness until noon arrived.

I yawned again and rubbed my fingernail on the rooftop’s saltstone rim in front of me. Curiously, our warehouse was still growing. The changes were minute, but looking closely I could see that vines as thin as pencil lines were growing along the saltstone, as if carved by an invisible hand.

The city's major changes happened on the first and last days of a building's life, but the times between weren't static. Tiny ornamentations often popped up, ones that would be gone in another day or two, weathered away by the inevitable decay that was this city's infinite cycle.

The alarm on my rifle buzzed again, and I looked through the scope at the map. The sound was coming from on top of our warehouse, and a moment later I heard footsteps grinding on the saltstone. They came from the direction of the staircase from the building below, the one that led from the loft to the roof. It was likely one of my team. Still, I carefully slipped my mobile out the side of the sniper hole, using its camera—which had a feed to the scope—to see who was up there.

It was Larcener.

I hadn't been expecting *that.* I couldn't recall him setting foot outside his room at any of the three bases, except during times when we'd needed to transition from one to the other. He stood with his hand shading his face, scowling at the distant sunrise.

"Larcener?" I asked, crawling back out of the sniper hole, rifle in tow. "Is everything all right?"

"People enjoy these," he said.

"What?" I asked, following his gaze. "Sunrises?"

"They always talk about the sunrise," he said, sounding annoyed. "How beautiful it is, blah blah. Like each one is some unique wonder. I don't see it."

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm increasingly certain," he said dryly, "that I'm the only one on this planet who *isn't.*"

"Then you must be blind," I said, looking toward the sunrise. As sunrises went, it wasn't much. It didn't have clouds to reflect off, and today it was pretty much uniformly one color instead of spanning the spectrum.

"A ball of fire," he said. "Garish orange. Harsh light."

"Yeah," I said, smiling. "Amazing." I thought of the years in Newcago's darkness, when we'd judged the time of day by the dimness of the lights. I thought of emerging to an open sky for the first time since my childhood, watching the sun come up and bathe everything in warmth.

The sunrise didn't need to be beautiful to be beautiful.

"I come look at them sometimes," Larcener said, "just to see if I can pick out what everyone else seems to see."

"Hey," I said. "How much do you know about the way this city grows?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Because it's interesting," I said, kneeling down. "Do you see this vinework? It's still growing. Is that because the original warehouse had this pattern in its brick and wood? I mean, it wouldn't make much sense if it did, but the other option would be that the *powers* are making art here. Isn't that odd?"

"I really couldn't say."

I looked at him. "You don't know, do you? You absorbed this power when you took over the city, but you don't know how it works."

"I know that it does what I want. What else matters?"

"Beauty," I said, rubbing my finger along one of the vines. "My father always said that the Epics were wonderful. Amazing. A glimpse of something truly divine, you know? It's easy to pay attention to the destruction, like what Obliteration did to Kansas City. But there's beauty too. It almost makes me feel bad to kill Epics."

He sniffed disdainfully. "I see through your act, David Charleston."

"My…act?" I stood back up and turned toward him.

"The act of despising Epics," he said. "You hate them, yes, but as the mouse hates the cat. The hate of envy. The hate of the small who wishes to be great."

"Don't be silly."

"Silly?" Larcener asked. "You think it isn't obvious? A man does not study, learn, obsess as you have because of *hatred.* No, these are the signs of lust. You have sought a father among the Epics, a lover among them." He stepped toward me. "Admit it. You want nothing more than to be one of us."

"I loved Megan before I realized what she was," I said, teeth clenched, shocked at the sudden anger I felt. "You don't know anything."

"Don't I?" he said. "I've watched people like you so many times—you see the truth of men manifest in those first moments, David. New Epics. They murder, they destroy, they show what every man would do if his inhibitions were removed. Men are a race of monsters, inefficiently chained. That's what's inside *you.* Deny it, I dare you. Deny it, man who presumes to know Epics better than he knows himself!"

I didn't dare. I spun from him and climbed back into the sniper nest to finish my shift. Eventually, he grumbled behind me and left.

Hours passed. I couldn't shake the things Larcener had said, though I tried. As noon approached, and the time for my shift to end, I found myself fixating on something he'd said to me.

Man who presumes to know Epics better than he knows himself…

Did I really know them? I knew their powers, yes, but not the Epics themselves; they weren't all of one mind. That was one of the easy mistakes people made. Epics felt an overwhelming sense of arrogance, so you could predict some of their actions, but they were still people. Individuals. No, I didn't know them.

But I did know Prof.

Oh, Calamity, I thought.

It finally came together. The thing that had been bothering me. I pulled out of my sniper nest and dashed down the steps into the warehouse.

I stumbled out of the stairwell into the loft, running to the edge to look at the warehouse floor below. Mizzy sat on a table, spinning her keys around her finger, while Megan sat cross-legged on the floor, concentrating. Near Megan, the air shimmered and Cody appeared.

"Well," Cody said, "I think I'm getting the hang of this. It seems way more powerful than the tensors were back in Newcago. Full-blown forcefield walls work too."

"Guys!" I shouted.

"David, lad?" Cody called up. "This dimensional deal is working great!"

"Why," I shouted, "would Prof give us a two-day deadline?"

They all regarded me in silence.

"To…make us panic?" Mizzy asked. "Force us to give in? That's why you usually give deadlines, right?"

"No, look at it like a Reckoner," I said, frustrated. "Assume that Prof is plotting, like we are. Assume he's formed his own team, his own plan to attack. We're thinking of him like some faceless despot, but he's not. He's one of us. That deadline is way too suspicious."

"Sparks," Megan said, standing up. "Sparks! In this case, you'd only give a *two*-day deadline…"

"…because you're planning to attack in *one* day," Abraham finished. "If not sooner."

"We need to pull out," I said. "Out of this location, out of the *city.*

Move!”

40

THE subsequent mad scramble had *some* order to it, as we never set up a base without first preparing to pull out. The team knew what to do, even if there was a lot of cursing and some chaos.

I dashed down the steps, almost colliding with Mizzy, who was on her way up to the loft to get our extra ammunition and explosives, which we kept far from where we slept. Abraham went for our power cells and guns, where he'd set them out along the wall.

Cody went running toward the door. I stopped him with a barked "Wait!"

He froze and turned toward me, still in the tensor suit.

"Megan," I said, "you're on scouting duty instead of Cody. Cody, you do her job and get the food rations ready. That suit is too valuable to risk out there, in case there's some sort of trap waiting for a scout."

Megan obeyed immediately, and I tossed her Cody's rifle as she passed. Cody hiked back, looking a little sullen, but started gathering our packs together—checking to make sure each one had food, water, and a bedroll.

I hurried to text Knighthawk. *Our location might be compromised,* I sent him. *We are pulling out. Would you mind lending me one or two of the drones you have patrolling the area?*

He didn't reply immediately, so I hurried to help Mizzy with the ammo and explosives. She nodded in gratitude as I took the armful from her.

"Goodbye gift?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "But only if you can do it quickly. I want out of here in five."

"Got it," she said, scrambling up to the loft. She'd have an explosive charge set and ready to blast the entire warehouse to dust by the time we were done packing.

"Make sure there's a remote way to disarm it," I called after her, remembering Cody's story about the dead kids—which I was *almost* certain was made up.

I placed the ammo in the backpacks—which Cody had set out in a row, bedrolls attached at the top—then zipped each one. There were packs for all of us but Abraham, who would be carrying a larger duffel with gravatonic lifts, filled with our guns and power cells.

My mobile buzzed.

How do you know I still have drones in the area? Knighthawk wrote.

Because you're paranoid, I wrote back, *and you want to keep an eye on Prof?*

I slung one pack over my shoulder, then set a second one at my feet—I'd be carrying Megan's until she could meet up with us.

You really are smarter than you seem, he wrote me. *Fine. I'll do a sweep of your area and send you the video.*

I waited, anxious, as Abraham finished his packing. Mizzy hurried down to grab her bag, and nodded at me. Cody already had his on his shoulder. Under five minutes. Nearby, Larcener wandered out of the little room Cody had made for him.

"Did I miss something?" he asked.

"Crap," Megan said over the line.

I put my hand to my earpiece. "What?"

"He's got an entire army working its way through the streets toward us, Knees. Our primary exit points are both blocked. By the time we picked up on this from the sniper nest, we'd have been surrounded. We might be already."

"Pull back," I said. "I'm going to get intel through Knighthawk."

"Roger."

I looked to the others.

"False faces?" Mizzy asked.

"Whatever our faces are, we're going to look *sparking* suspicious with all this equipment," I said.

"Then we leave it," Abraham said. "We're not ready for a fight."

“And we’ll be more ready in twenty-four hours?” I asked. “When he destroys Newcago?”

My phone buzzed; Knighthawk was actually calling me, which was rare. I picked up, dialing his feed into our communal line so everyone could hear him through their earpieces.

“You guys are screwed,” he said. “I’m sending you footage in infrared.”

Abraham stepped over, lowering his mobile, and we crowded around to look. A map of our area showed hundreds, maybe thousands of people descending on our position, each an infrared dot. They formed a complete circle.

“East Lane,” Knighthawk said. “See those corpses? Bystanders who tried to run. They’re gunning down anyone who attempts to escape that circle. They’re sending a team into every building, holding the people there at gunpoint and—best I can tell from the shot I got through a window—feeling their faces.”

“Feeling their faces?” Mizzy asked.

“To see if any part is illusory,” I said. “Prof knows that Megan can fool a dowser, but the overlays she creates *are* still illusions. They feel a nose that doesn’t fit the image of its face, something like that, and they’ll know they’ve found us.”

“Like I said,” Knighthawk added. “Screwed.”

Megan rushed in through the door and closed it behind her, back up against the saltstone. “Surrounded?” she asked, reading our expressions.

I nodded.

“So what do we do?” she asked, joining our little huddle.

I looked at the others. One at a time, they nodded.

“We fight,” Abraham said softly.

“We fight,” Mizzy agreed. “He’ll be expecting us to try to punch out; it’s Reckoner protocol when surprised or outmatched.”

I smiled, feeling a sudden swell of pride. “If this were one of Prof’s teams,” I said, “we’d run.”

“We’re not his team,” Cody said. “Not anymore. We’re here to change the world; we ain’t going to do that without a fight.”

“It’s stupid,” I noted.

“Sometimes stupid is right,” Megan said, then paused. “Hell. I hope

nobody ever quotes me on that one. So where's our battlefield?"

"Same place it was always going to be," I said.

Then I pointed down. That tunnel and cave complex was beneath us. "Cody, cut us a path. We go in full gear, exactly as we planned. We won't have as much of an edge as we hoped, but we've still got those caverns mapped, and they'll allow us to fight him with the least chance of causing harm to people nearby."

"Wait," Megan said. "If Cody uses the tensors, that will call Prof right to us—he'll know that we have the device."

"Yeah," Knighthawk said over the line. "He's hovering at the rear of his little army right now, but that won't last long. Years ago, when we tested it, using a motivator drove him into a rage. He'll come for you immediately."

Cody looked at his hands. "I…Lad, I just started practicing with these tensors. They're stronger than the ones we had before, but it could take *hours* for me to cut an escape hole."

"It shouldn't," I said. "You've seen what Prof can do—level buildings, vaporize huge swaths of ground. You hold that power, Cody."

Cody set his jaw. The tensors started glowing green.

None of us asked how Prof had located us. It could have happened in one of any number of ways—our bases here in Ildithia weren't terribly secure. Maybe we'd been spotted by an informant, or perhaps Prof did have an Epic who could dowse for us, or maybe he'd noticed the drone deliveries.

"All right," Cody said. "Everyone get ready, and then I'll do the deed. Time to fight."

41

THE team loaded up. Weapons in hand, mobiles strapped to arms, earpieces in. Mizzy tossed a small box to each of us: a compressed rappelling cord. I affixed mine to my belt.

We left our packs, only grabbing some ammo. The packs were for long-term survival. After this, one way or another, we wouldn't need them.

Tension laced the air, like the distant scent of smoke that signaled a fire. We weren't ready, but the battle had arrived anyway. Right now it was all up to Cody. He stood in the center of our warehouse base, eyeing the dusty saltstone floor. He'd always seemed lanky in an almost comical way to me, but now—wearing the tensor suit, with its glowing greens and dramatic, futuristic vest, he cut an imposing profile.

I stepped up to him. "It's down there, Cody," I said. "An entire cave complex. The battlefield *we* have chosen. All we need is a pathway."

He took in a deep breath.

"Remember what you said when you were first training me in the tensors?" I asked.

"Yeah…you've gotta use them like you're caressing a beautiful woman."

"I was thinking more the other thing you said. You've got to have the soul of a warrior, like William Wallace."

"William Wallace got murdered, lad."

"Oh."

"But he didn't go down without a fight," Cody said, steeling himself.

“All right. Hold on to yer haggis, everyone.” He raised his hands before himself, and a green glow ran down the wires strapped to his arms and into his hands. He thrust his hands forward, and I felt a distinct hum that seemed to vibrate all the way down to my soul without actually making a sound.

A three-foot-by-three-foot section of ground vaporized, maybe ten feet deep. That was very impressive on the old scale of the tensors, but nowhere near what we needed to reach those caverns.

“Jonathan’s moving!” Knighthawk said over the lines. “Sparks. You people are in trouble. He does *not* look happy!”

Cody swore under his breath, regarding the patch of floor that had been reduced to fine grains of sand. Wind from the open door of the loft curled some of the powder up in the draft.

I grabbed Cody’s arm. “Try again.”

“David, that’s as big as I can make it!” he said.

“Cody,” I said. “*Concentrate.* Soul of a warrior!”

“If I keep screwing this up, lad, we’re dead. Trapped in here. Gunned down. Hell of a lot of pressure to work under.”

“Sure,” I said, frantic. “But…um…no more pressure than when you stopped those terrorists from launching the nukes at Scotland that one time, right?”

He glanced at me, brow beading with sweat. Then he grinned. “How’d y’all know about that?”

“Lucky guess. Cody, you *can do this.*”

He focused again on the floor in front of him. His suit started glowing once more, ribbons of emerald coursing along his arms, pulsing like a heartbeat. Being so near made me feel something familiar, like hearing the voice of an old friend. It reminded me of days in the caverns of Newcago, of innocence and conviction.

Cody raised his hands over his head, and the thrumming grew louder. “Like caressing a woman,” he whispered. “A very, very *large* woman.” He released the power with a defiant shout, and it blasted into the floor with such force that it sent me to my knees.

Inches before me, the ground disintegrated into a large hole filled with grains of salt. I watched as the grains siphoned away to reveal a hole a good five feet across. It curved downward, with smooth, glassy sides, traveling through saltstone and then actual rock. The vanishing salt indicated that it opened into something much larger below.

“Remind me,” I said to Cody, “never to let you caress me.”

He grinned, holding up hands that glowed bright green.

“He’ll be there any second, you slontzes,” Knighthawk said over the line. “He’s taking it more slowly than I’d have expected; he’s a careful one, to be sure, but he’s still almost upon you. I’d vacate if I were you.”

“Down,” I said, catching my Gottschalk as Abraham tossed it to me. “Remember starting positions!”

Mizzy skidded to the side of the hole and, using a large, tubelike gun, planted a series of spikes into the floor there. She hooked her rappelling cord to one, then jumped in. Megan hooked on to another spike, then followed, sliding down the hole like it was a ride in an old amusement park.

I glanced at Larcener, gesturing for him to go.

“I’ll remain,” he said.

“He wants to kill you!” I said.

“And he’ll be drawn to you people,” Larcener said, folding his arms. “I’ll be safer hiding in my room up here.”

“Not with the explosives Mizzy left behind. Look, we could use your help. Join us. Change the world.”

He sniffed and turned away.

I felt it like a punch to the gut.

“David,” Cody said, watching the ceiling. “Let’s move, lad!”

Teeth clenched, I pulled the end of the rappelling cord from the box at my belt and hooked it on to an empty spike, then threw myself into the hole. I slid down smooth stone in the darkness, trying to contain my frustration. My expectations were foolish, but part of me had still assumed that Larcener would join us for this battle.

I’d always intended to speak with him further, but we’d constantly been frantic with some other preparation. Should I have done anything else? *Could* I have done anything else? If I’d been cleverer, or more persuasive, could I have found a way to bring him to our side?

My mobile automatically engaged the box at the correct depth, putting resistance on my cord until I slowed, then popped out into a larger chamber, lurching to a stop a mere two or three feet above the ground. I cut and dropped into an enormous pile of salt and rock dust. I pushed through, getting out of the way of the opening.

Mizzy and Megan shined their mobiles about, lighting a series of natural

caverns covered with an impressive amount of graffiti. The caverns tended to be low-ceilinged—about ten feet high, though this wasn't uniform—and connected by tunnels with lots of nooks. It didn't look quite natural, but it was far more organic than the tunnels beneath Newcago. Had Digzone been as mad as the Diggers he gifted his powers to? Judging by the crazy number of caverns down here, that seemed likely.

Abraham came down into the pile of salt next, the rtich coating one arm. Finally Cody entered, and he hadn't bothered with a cord—he dropped out of the hole onto a forcefield that sprang into existence under his feet.

"Cody, disengage the powers," I said, and pointed down a turn in the cavern. "Find a spot in that direction and be ready. We won't be able to surprise him with your abilities, but I still want you to be hidden at first. Mizzy, be ready to blow your present up above on my mark."

"Larcener?" she asked.

"He knows about the blast," I said. "He'll get out of the way." And if he didn't, well, that was purely on his head.

I grabbed my mobile and scrambled across the cavern's uneven floor to a side passage. The complex was intricate, but my mobile's map noted a few relatively safe nooks from which I could run ops. This wasn't the exact side of the cavern complex where we'd originally planned to pull our trap, but it had to work.

Megan joined me. "Nice job with the Scotsman up there."

"He just needed a little nudge," I said, "to become what he always pretends to be."

"He's not the only one," she said. We stopped at an intersection of tunnels, and she pulled me close for a quick kiss. "You always thought you wanted to be in charge, David. You had good reason."

She turned to go the other direction. I held her arm, then hand, as she slipped away from me. "Don't push yourself too hard, Megan."

She smiled—sparks, what a smile—and held on to my fingers with hers. "I own it, David. It's *mine.* I don't fear it anymore. If it takes me, I'll find a way back."

She let go, crossing the cavern as I ducked into my chosen nook. It was a tight squeeze, requiring me to wriggle through some rock, but would shelter the light of my mobile from Prof's eyes, and shelter *me* from explosions. Inside, I was in a small bubble of a room with no other exits.

I reached to my belt and detached a headset with a dome of glass attached to its front. A grudging gift from Knighthawk in the same shipment as the tensor suit, multiple screens could be projected onto it.

"Mizzy," I said, "cameras in place?"

"Sticking the last one," she said. "Knighthawk, these things are *waaay* creepy."

"She says to the man who built them using a mannequin he controls with his mind," Abraham added under his breath.

"Shut it," Knighthawk said, though his voice was somewhat difficult to make out over noise on his end.

"Knighthawk," I said, "your line has some kind of static or interference on it."

"Hmm? Oh, don't worry. The popcorn is almost done."

"You're making *popcorn*?" Abraham demanded.

"Sure, why not? Should be quite the show…."

One by one, four screens blinked on on my headset's display, giving me a sequence of views of the main cavern and its nearby tunnels. Mizzy had set out glowsticks, though the cameras had thermal and night vision. These things had come from Knighthawk, little crablike drones with cameras in their bodies. I used my mobile to turn the camera of one drone, and it worked perfectly.

"Nice," Knighthawk said. He and Mizzy would be watching the screens also, though Mizzy would be busy with her explosives. Megan and I had been desperate when we'd faced our weaknesses; I hoped that if we could drive Prof to exhaustion, if we presented a real danger, we'd make it easier for him to do the same.

"Knighthawk," I said, cycling through the cameras to get a view from Cody's eyes, then Megan's, "Prof's ETA?"

"Just landed on your building," he said.

"Any other Epics with him?"

"Negative," Knighthawk said. "All right, he's vaporized the roof and he's dropping through."

"Mizzy," I said, "blow the present."

We felt the shock of it, and some debris rolled down the hole we'd made. I waited, tense, trying to watch all of the different screens at once. Which direction would he come from?

The roof of the cave trembled, then fell in, dumping practically a *ton* of salt dust into the main chamber. Light shone down in streaks. Prof wasn't content with a little hole like we'd made. He'd ripped the top off an entire cavern.

He floated down on a glowing disc of light, dust swirling around him, goggles on his face and his dark lab coat fluttering. My breath caught.

I didn't see a monster. In my mind's eye, I remembered a man who had come down through another roof amid falling dust. A man who had run for all he had—breaking through to face an Enforcement team, risking his life and his own sanity—to save me.

It was time to return the favor.

"Go," I whispered over the line.

42

ABRAHAM engaged him first, bringing out the big gun—his gravatonic minigun. I always got a little thrill when I watched it fire, because *man*—it could unload bullets faster than a pair of drunk hicks visiting a varmint factory.

"Everyone stay under cover," I warned as Abraham's gun flashed from the darkness, spraying Prof with a couple hundred rounds.

Prof's forcefields were up, and the bullets deflected—but those forcefields weren't invincible. Using them took effort. We could wear him down.

He sneered at Abraham, then flung his hand to the side, forming his trademark forcefield globe around the Canadian man. Prof clenched his fist to shrink it, but the forcefield caught as Abraham used the rtich to brace it on either side.

I had a good view of Prof's startled face through one camera.

"Cody, go," I said.

A flash of light shot from the shadows, and the forcefield around Abraham shattered. Good. As before, the tensor could negate forcefields. Though we had to be careful not to vaporize Abraham's gun as a byproduct.

Prof roared and pointed at Cody, though nothing seemed to happen. I frowned at the gesture, but didn't have time to think on it as Cody and Abraham engaged Prof. Cody wasn't practiced with forcefields—while perhaps trying to throw a globe around Prof, he instead made a wall between them. That accidentally protected him as Prof sent spears of light Cody's way. They slammed into the wall, piercing it and getting stuck.

“Abraham, wind around to his left,” I instructed. A blip appeared on my map of the caverns, a location where Mizzy had set up a pack of explosives. “Megan, see if you can draw him down that tunnel to the right, toward Mizzy’s surprise.”

“Roger,” Megan said.

My little cubby of a cave shook as Prof and Cody clashed, tensor blasts vaporizing one another’s forcefields. Abraham held his own with the rtich, forming it into a shield and catching spears of light. Cody wasn’t very useful with his own forcefields, unfortunately. A few hours of practice did not an expert make.

However, he did have tons of practice with the tensors from back in the day, and he was able to work those easily. He kept vaporizing Prof’s forcefields, protecting himself and—most importantly—Abraham. Cody’s suit had a harmsway attached to it, but Abraham didn’t have such a blessing.

I directed the team as best I could, and for once I didn’t have time to wish I were with them. I was too busy leading the team to push Prof toward the set explosions—we blasted him several times, staggering him and keeping him from bringing down Cody and Abraham. I also kept watch on Prof as he occasionally ducked through caverns at a run, trying to loop around and gain an advantage.

On my mark, Megan entered the fray, creating illusory versions of herself and Firefight to draw Prof’s attention and his attacks. So long as she didn’t push too hard, these would just be shadows from other dimensions, like the false faces we’d worn. It wouldn’t put anyone in any other dimension in danger, and hopefully wouldn’t risk her sanity. Only shadows and feints—anything to keep Prof distracted and off-balance.

I watched all of this with a sinking feeling. The longer they fought, the more obvious it became that Cody’s powers—though aligned more closely with Prof’s own abilities than even Tavi’s had been—would not immediately force Prof to change.

I zoomed my cameras in on Prof’s face, watching his expressions. His sneers and condescension soon gave way to a look of fierce determination. In that, I saw the man I knew.

Face it, Prof! I thought, huddled in my cocoon of stone, snapping orders and directing cameras. *Come on.* Why wasn’t it enough? Why wouldn’t his powers give way before his fears?

“Megan, Cody,” I said, “I want to try something. The tensors disrupt his

forcefields, even the ones protecting his skin. Find a way to catch him in a blast of tensor power, Cody. Then, Megan, I want you to shoot him."

"Roger," Megan said. "Do you care where I hit him?"

"No," I said. "His powers are strong enough that he should be able to heal from anything a handgun can dish out." I paused. "But maybe make the first hit or two someplace non-lethal, just in case."

"Roger," they said as one.

Cody was panting. "Hitting him with the tensors is going to be tough, lad. He's been trying to do the same to us, to melt my motivators away. We've been keeping our distance."

I focused a camera on him. Seemed like using the tensor suit was exhausting. He and Megan maneuvered into position while Mizzy set up some more explosives farther down the corridor.

"We'll have to risk it," I said. "I—"

"Ach!" Cody interrupted. "What the…"

"Cody?" I asked. He didn't seem hurt, but he'd stumbled back against the cavern wall and had managed to surround himself with a box of glowing green forcefields.

"Was that a squirrel?" he said. "It was running across me. A *bloody* squirrel?"

"What are you talking about?" Mizzy asked.

Cody seemed confused. "Maybe it was a rat or something. I didn't get a good look."

I frowned as he dismissed his forcefields and ran to join Abraham, who had moved in close to Prof after forming the rtich into a gauntlet covered in spikes.

"Knighthawk, Mizzy," I said, "did either of you happen to see that thing? Whatever it was that was attacking Cody?"

"I saw a blur," Knighthawk said. "I'm rewinding the footage now. I'll send you a still if I spot something."

Prof pushed past Abraham, leaving him tripping over a forcefield rod created right before his legs. Prof slammed his hand to the floor of the cavern and vaporized it in a large swath, dumping Cody into a river of dust. Cody stumbled, slowing down.

Prof summoned a spike of light in each hand and shot them across the

room, pounding them into Cody's shoulders. Cody screamed and fell into the dust.

Sparks. It was obvious who knew these powers better.

"Megan!" I cried.

"On it," she said, and the ceiling of the cavern rumbled and collapsed, making Prof jump back in alarm. Merely a shadow of another world, but hopefully it would buy Cody enough time to heal.

"Prof started speaking into a mobile," Knighthawk said, surprised. "He must know we're monitoring his line….Sparks. He's talking to you, I think."

"Patch it through to me," I said, "but don't let him hear what we're saying."

"…think to beat me with my own curse." Prof's familiar voice, gruff and deep, startled me even though I'd been expecting it. "I have borne this viper for years, felt it poisoning me day by day. I know it like a man knows his own heartbeat."

"David, lad," Cody said, coughing. "I'm…I'm not healing…."

I felt an icy chill. I focused on Cody, and it was true. He crawled through dust in the trench Prof had made, bleeding from both shoulders, where he'd been struck by light made solid. Why wasn't the harmsway working?

"Got it," Knighthawk said. "Kid, this is trouble." He sent to my screen an image from the camera footage from moments earlier. It showed a blur moving away from Cody, small like a mouse. Or a tiny person.

"Loophole is here!" I said over the line. "He didn't come alone! Warning, there's *another Epic* in the cavern." I hesitated. "Sparks, she unhooked one of the motivators from Cody's vest and ran off with it."

"Cameras have infrared," Knighthawk said, taking control of several of them. He sounded excited. Engaged, even. "Overlaying now…There! I've got her. Ha. Think you can hide from my all-seeing eyes, little Epic? You don't know who you're dealing with."

Knighthawk zoomed one of our cameras toward a tiny figure hiding in the shadows near one of the cavern's many broken chunks of rock. She wore jeans, goggles, and a tight shirt. I didn't spot the motivator, but she'd likely shrunk it to a size small enough to carry.

"Megan!" I said as Prof rounded the false cave-in. "You and Abraham are going to have to handle him on your own for a time. Keep him distracted; he's going to try to finish off Cody. Mizzy, go help get Cody bandaged.

Don’t let him bleed out!”

A series of “rogers” sounded. I started wriggling out of my stone confines.

“Should have known,” Knighthawk said over the line. “Of course Jonathan came with a plan. He may not have realized I used multiple motivators on this version of the suit though, so his orders to Loophole weren’t complete enough.”

“I need you to run ops, Knighthawk.”

“Fine,” he said, reluctant. “You’re going to take on the mini-Epic by yourself?”

I squeezed out of my cubby and rolled to my feet, Gottschalk to my shoulder. “She’s not a High Epic. A single bullet will kill her.”

“Yeah. Hit her with a bullet the same size as she is—I’m sure that won’t harm the motivator she’s carrying.”

I grimaced as I crept down the hallway. It was a valid point. “Keep an eye on her for me.”

“Already done. One of the cameras is set to auto-track her. Jonathan’s talking again.”

“Patch him through to me, but not the others. I don’t want them distracted. And Knighthawk…keep them alive for me, please.”

“I’ll try. Get that motivator, kid. Fast.”

43

"I didn't want to be here."

I had to listen to Prof as I crept back up the tunnel, lit by the sickly green light of glowsticks.

"I wanted to remain quiet," Prof continued, grunting as he fought. "I didn't want to push myself, or my teams, too hard. This is your fault, David. Everything that happens here is because of *you.*"

I couldn't see the battle. I still wore the domed headset, but my task was now Loophole and that motivator. I had one screen fixed on the map of the caverns with her location pinpointed; another showed the view from the camera watching her. They hovered at the edges of my vision; I needed the area right in front of my eyes clear.

I walked carefully, as if preparing to join the battle with Prof. I didn't want to alert Loophole.

"Tia…," Prof whispered. "You drove me to this, David. You and your idiot dreams. You upset the balance. You should have accepted that I was *right.*"

I gritted my teeth, face flushing. I couldn't let him get to me. But his words were dangerous for reasons he likely didn't know. Last time I'd been in a fight, back in Sharp Tower…things had happened.

Something lurked inside me. And so, while Prof's belittling voice in my ears was abrasive, Larcener's taunts from the rooftop earlier were what truly dug into me.

You see the truth of men manifest in those first moments, David…New Epics. They murder, they destroy, showing what every *man would do if his*

inhibitions were relaxed. Men are a race of monsters, inefficiently chained….

Loophole. I had to focus on Loophole. She was the problem right now! What could she do?

She…she had slightly augmented speed and could alter the size of things, herself included. She had to touch them first though. Her size manipulation lasted a few minutes if left unchecked—she couldn't do it permanently, but she could shrink something and leave it. It would return to normal on its own later, or if she touched it and changed its size again.

Fortunately, unlike other similar Epics, when she shrank she didn't retain her strength or mass. She was fast, clever, and dangerous—but not a High Epic. And her weakness…I strained trying to remember…her weakness was sneezing. Her powers disappeared if she sneezed. I had explicit records of that.

Well, just because she wasn't a High Epic didn't mean she wasn't dangerous. I reached the part of the corridor where she was hiding, then continued down it toward the others, pretending I didn't know she was there. Light shone down from the hole Prof had made in the ceiling. I grabbed a handful of rock dust off the ground, shoving it into my pocket. Distant crashes and shouts echoed from ahead. I resisted the urge to switch camera views and check in.

"And where are you, David?" Prof said in my ear. "You let the others die fighting me, but you hide? I never would have figured you for a coward."

On the screen hovering to my right, Loophole was beside her rock, waiting with her back pressed against it. She didn't seem concerned; she was a mercenary, known for giving her loyalty to whichever powerful Epic paid her. Prof had likely hired her only to steal the motivator. She'd want nothing else to do with this fight.

Too bad for her.

Go.

I leaped toward the rock where she was hiding, shoving it against the wall of the cavern, hoping to pinch her in place. Halfway through my push the rock vanished, shrinking to the size of a pebble. I hit the ground, scrambling to grab the tiny figure as it sprinted away.

I got ahold of her but immediately felt a lurching jolt. Loophole was my size again, but she was halfway down the tunnel from me. Why was the tunnel so much larger now?

Aw, didgeridoo, I thought, *she shrank me!*

I scrambled to my feet between pebbles that were now the size of boulders. In front of me, a small crack in the floor had become a chasm—though granted, it was only about twice as deep as I was tall. I'd been shrunk, as had everything I'd been holding.

Loophole, also tiny, had gotten a good fifty feet in front of me, or at least what seemed fifty feet at my current size. Her augmented speed let her run quickly, but it wasn't true super speed. Just a little edge on a regular person.

That meant she couldn't outrun bullets or anything like that. I unslung my tiny Gottschalk, took aim, and released a burst, intentionally missing. I could still easily pierce the motivator, effectively killing Cody. I'd take that chance if she didn't stop, but a warning shot seemed appropriate.

"I've got you, Loophole!" I shouted to her. "Give me the motivator and leave. You don't care about this fight, and I don't care about you."

She stopped in the corridor and glanced at me.

Then grew to normal size.

Uh-oh…

She came stomping toward me, each footfall shaking the floor like an earthquake. I yelped and threw myself into the nearby crack, sliding down onto a ledge as Loophole loomed overhead. She reached down for me, and I unloaded with the Gottschalk. Apparently even a tiny gun on full auto doesn't feel good. She pulled her fingers back and cursed—a sound like a thunderstorm.

Bits of rock dust tumbled into my chasm, falling like a shower of hail. I reached in my pocket and pulled out some of the dust I'd grabbed earlier; it had shrunk with me.

I had to get it into her face. Great. It would be like climbing Everest to get up there. Also, noses look really strange from below. I did notice a small pouch hanging from a strap around her neck. The motivator, maybe?

She came at me with a knife next, jabbing it into the crack. I grabbed hold of the back of it with one hand, letting the Gottschalk hang from my shoulder by its strap. I was able to ride the knife out as she lifted it, but my plans of climbing up her arm were ruined as she shook the knife, dropping me some twenty feet to the floor.

I braced myself and hit…but it didn't hurt much. Huh. Being little had its advantages. I rolled to my feet as she stomped at me. I barely avoided

being squished by a footfall. Blast, I'd lost my handful of dust in the fall. In fact…

In fact…I…

I sneezed, and thumped my head against the wall of the cavern as I crashed up against it. I'd increased in size again. Loophole and I regarded one another with similar expressions of shock.

"Sneezing works on either of us, eh?" I said. "Nice to know."

She growled, reaching for the holster at her side and the handgun there. I kicked it from her grip as soon as she got it free, then slung the Gottschalk around. "Sure you don't want to give me the motivator?"

She reached for me. So, reluctantly, I fired.

Each bullet, as it hit her, shrank to the size of a gnat. They still seemed to hurt, judging by her winces, but they certainly didn't do the whole "killing you dead" thing I'd been hoping for.

She had a hold on the rifle a second later, and it vanished in my hands, shrinking to minuscule size and falling off its strap. I gaped at Loophole. She'd shrunk bullets *as they were hitting her.*

"That was awesome," I said.

She decked me, knocking my head against the wall of the cavern again and smashing my headset. I cursed, kicking at her, then scrambled to my feet. "Seriously," I said to Loophole, "I might have to reevaluate. You could be a High Epic after all."

"What is *wrong* with you?" she asked, coming at me swinging.

I brought my hands up and managed to block. Unfortunately my return jab at her missed, and she clocked me across the face a second time. Sparks. When she came in again, I grabbed hold of her, as Abraham had taught me. I was bigger, so grappling seemed smart.

She shrank my shirt.

It just about strangled me, but fortunately it ripped before doing that. I still let go of the woman, gasping. Loophole slammed her hand into my chest, and I grew to twenty feet tall, smashing my head into the roof of the cavern.

"David!" Mizzy said over the line. "Hurry! He's in a bad way."

"Trying," I croaked as Loophole shrank me down to normal size, then punched me in the face again. The cavern shook and rattled, chips of rock falling from the ceiling, and shouts came from the direction of Prof, Megan,

and Abraham.

I stumbled away from Loophole, then brought up my arms to block, my hand-to-hand training—and my brain—kind of fuzzy at the moment. Her flurry of punches backed me against the wall, where she continued to quite liberally beat on my face, then stomach, in turn. I had one chance to reach for my handgun, which I wore strapped to my leg, but she knocked it out of my grasp.

She seemed to have grown a few inches, and she towered over me. As my gun clattered away, the only thing I could think to do was jump for her and throw my weight against her, which worked well enough—in that it tumbled us both to the ground.

She got up first. I was pretty dizzy, my shirt in tatters. I groaned, rolling over, and found her picking up her fallen handgun.

Something dropped from the ceiling onto her back. A mechanical crab? Another one jumped at her from the side, then a third fell from above. They didn't look particularly dangerous, but they startled her, causing her to spin around and grab at her back.

The breather was a lifesaver for me, giving me enough time to stop the room from spinning. I dug in my pocket, getting out some more dust. Guns wouldn't work on her. I'd have to be cleverer.

"Thanks, Knighthawk," I mumbled as Loophole shrank to get out of the grip of the crabs.

I reached for her, and—like before—she shrank me as soon as I touched her tiny form. I was ready for it this time, and lunged for her as soon as I was tiny. I crashed into her again, grabbing at the pouch around her neck. I felt the thin metal rectangle through the leather inside. The motivator!

"Persistent little idiot, aren't you?" she growled at me as the two of us, still tiny, grappled across the floor.

I grunted, managing to roll us up beside the crack-chasm in the ground. Then she head-butted me—and it *stung*. The room shook and I gasped, letting go—of both her and the pouch.

She rose, standing before me, the crack in the ground behind her. "I know his plan," she said. "Epic of all Epics. Sounds like a great deal to me. I let him gather the pieces, then I make off with them. Go up and pay a visit to old Calamity myself."

I looked up at her, dazed, my nose bleeding.

"I…," I said, gasping.

"Yes?"

I panted. "I…suppose this…would be an awkward time to ask for an autograph."

"What?"

I threw the dust into her face, then—as she cursed—I slammed my shoulder into her, grabbing the pouch while simultaneously knocking her backward. The cord snapped, leaving the pouch in my fingers. She fell into the chasm-crack, and I rocked there, on the edge, almost following her in.

She dropped to the bottom, where she hit with a soft thump. "You idiot!" she called up. "You realize that at this size"—she stopped, sniffling for a second—"at this size, a fall isn't harmful at all. You could fall off a building, and—and— Oh, *hell*—"

I jumped away from the crack. A very faint sneeze came from behind.

Followed by a gut-wrenching splat. I winced, peeking at the mess of pulped flesh and broken bones that Loophole had become by growing too quickly inside far too small a space. Parts of her burbled out the top of the crack, like rising dough that had outgrown its bowl.

I swallowed, nauseous, then stumbled to my feet and pulled the motivator from the pouch. A bit of dust and one sneeze later, both it and I were back to regular size—though my Gottschalk was nowhere to be found.

I grabbed my handgun instead. "Mizzy, I've got the motivator," I said over the line. "Where are you?"

44

I stumbled through the caverns underneath Ildithia, passing walls blasted open with the tensors, leaving scattered piles of sand. The glowsticks gave the tunnels a radioactive cast. I stopped, steadying myself during another tremor, then continued toward the nook where Mizzy had dragged Cody. Was that them ahead?

No. I pulled up short. Light poured through a rent in the air, like cut flesh where the skin had curled to the sides. Through it I saw another cavern, this one lit by a lively orange light. Inside, Firefight struggled against Loophole.

I gaped, watching the woman I'd just killed shrink and run from him while causing a set of falling rock chips to become boulders. Firefight zipped backward, his flames heating the rocks to a reddish orange.

I looked down the passage and glimpsed other rents in the air. Megan had been pushing herself, it seemed. I gulped and continued toward Mizzy. A flash of light to my left illuminated figures struggling in the shadows—a section of the cavern network beyond where Mizzy had placed her glowsticks.

Prof suddenly appeared a little ways down the cavern, forming like light coalescing. He was using Obliteration's powers to teleport. Sparks! Even as he appeared, a section of the roof collapsed. Not an illusion this time, an actual rockfall, which Prof was forced to catch with a forcefield above his head. He bellowed with rage, holding up the fallen rocks, then sent a few lances of light off into the distance.

They'd both been forced, it seemed, to grasp for dangerous resources.

Prof using his hidden teleportation device; Megan reaching further and further into other realities. How far had she gone? What if I lost her, as I'd lost Prof?

Steady, I thought at myself. She'd been certain she could handle it. I had to trust her. I ducked my head and scrambled down a side tunnel, eventually spotting bloodstains on the stones. I rounded another corner, then stumbled to a halt as I almost tripped over Mizzy and Cody.

He lay on the ground with eyes closed, his face pale. Mizzy had needed to pull off most of the tensor suit to get at his wounds; it was piled in a heap nearby, the harmsway portion detached, but with wires extended to his arm. Mizzy yelped when she saw me, then snatched the motivator from my limp fingers. She plugged it back into the vest.

"Knighthawk," I said over the line, "you really need to secure those motivators better."

"It's a prototype," he grumbled. "I built it to have quick access so I could tweak motivators as needed. How was I to know Jonathan would yank the things out?"

Mizzy glanced at me as the harmsway glowed softly. "Sparks, David! You look like you fell off a cliff or something."

I wiped my nose, which was still bleeding. My face was starting to swell from the beating I'd taken. I slumped down next to Mizzy, exhausted. "How's the fight going?"

"Your girlfriend is kinda amazing," Mizzy said grudgingly. "Abraham keeps getting locked up in forcefields, but she gets him out. Together they're keeping Prof busy."

"Does she seem…"

"Crazy?" Mizzy said. "Can't tell." She looked to Cody, whose wounds were—blessedly—closing. "He'll be out for a while yet. Hope the other two can last. I'm out of boom-packs too, I'm afraid. So maybe—"

Someone exploded into existence next to us. A sudden burst of light, silent, but stunning if you watched it. I shouted, falling backward, and reached for the handgun strapped to my leg. It wasn't Prof. Unfortunately, that left only one other option.

Obliteration turned, his trench coat sweeping the side of the cavern. He looked from Mizzy to Cody to me, studying us with bespectacled eyes. "I've been summoned," he said.

"Um, yeah," I said, hands trembling as I held my gun on him. "Prof. He

has a motivator built from your flesh."

"To destroy the city?" Obliteration asked, head cocked. "She made a bomb beyond those she gave me?"

"Those she gave you?" I asked. "So…you do have more?"

"Of course," Obliteration said calmly. "You are fallen, David Charleston." He shook his head, then disappeared, leaving behind an image made of ceramic that broke apart and faded.

I relaxed. Then Obliteration appeared beside me, hand on my gun. It was suddenly hot, and I shouted, fingers singeing as I dropped the weapon. Obliteration kicked it aside, kneeling next to me.

" 'And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come,' " he whispered. He flinched as, distantly, Prof must have teleported. Then he grinned, closing his eyes. Sparks. He seemed to *like* the feeling. "The hour has come for you to die and for this city to be destroyed. I regret that I cannot give you more time." He placed his hand against my forehead, and I felt warmth coming from his skin.

"I'm going to kill Calamity," I blurted out.

Obliteration opened his eyes. The heat dampened. "What did you say?"

"Calamity," I said. "He's an Epic, and he's behind all of this. I can kill him. If you want to bring about Armageddon, wouldn't that be the perfect way? Destroy this terrible…um, angel? Creature? Spirit?"

That sounded religious, right?

"He is far away, little man," Obliteration said, contemplative. "You will never reach him."

"You can teleport there though, right?"

"Impossible. Calamity is too distant for me to form a proper picture of its location in my mind, and I cannot go to a place I haven't seen or cannot visualize."

How did you get in here, then? Sparks. Had he been watching us somehow? That didn't matter. Hand still trembling, I reached into my pocket and unhooked my mobile. I brought it out and turned to him, displaying Regalia's image of Calamity. "What if you have a picture?"

Obliteration whispered softly, eyes wide. " 'And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition….' " He blinked, looking at me. "Again you surprise me. If you defeat your former master, and impress me in so doing, I will grant your desires."

He exploded into a flash again—and this time he didn't immediately return. I groaned, leaning against the wall, shaking my burned hand.

"Calamity! What is *up* with that man?" Mizzy asked, sliding her sidearm into its holster. It took her three tries, her hand was trembling so much. "I thought we were dead."

"Yeah," I said. "I half expected him to murder me for the audacity of claiming I wanted to kill Calamity. I figured it was even odds that he worshipped the thing instead of hating it." I peeked around the corner, looking down a tunnel that shone with rents and rips into other dimensions.

"Abraham just went down!" Knighthawk said in my ear. "Repeat, Abraham is *down.* Jonathan sheared his arm off—rtich attached—with a forcefield."

"Sparks!" I said. "Megan?"

"Hard to see," Knighthawk said. "I've only got two crab cameras left. I think you're losing this fight, guys."

"We were losing it before we started," I said, turning and crawling to the tensor suit. "Mizzy, some help."

She looked at the suit, then at me, eyes widening. She scrambled over, then helped me start putting it on. "Cody should be stable now; that harmsway is something."

"Unhook it and attach it back to the tensor suit," I said. "Knighthawk, how much can your drones lift?"

"About a hundred pounds each," he said. "I work them in tandem for heavier things. Why?"

"Bring some down, grab Cody, pull him out. Is Abraham still alive?"

"Don't know," Knighthawk said. "His mobile is still on him though, so I can show you his location."

I looked at Mizzy and she nodded, plugging the wires from the harmsway into the vest of the tensor suit, which I was now wearing. "I'll find him," she said, "and stabilize him until you can get back with this."

"Get the drones hooked to Cody first."

"Assuming I can get drones in to you," Knighthawk said. "Jonathan's military has the place surrounded up above. They don't seem too eager to come down and join the fight."

"And get between two High Epics?" I said. "They'll stay back unless

directly ordered. They know what happened to the soldiers at Sharp Tower. I'm surprised he was able to get even Loophole to come down here, after that."

"Yeah," Mizzy said. She looked overwhelmed, hand still trembling. I didn't feel much better myself, though with a jolt I felt the harmsway engage. My pains faded.

"Get out of here, Mizzy," I said. "You've done what you can. Try to get Abraham and Cody to safety; I'll bring the harmsway for Abraham as soon as I can. If I don't make it, set up with Knighthawk."

She nodded. "Good luck, David. I'm, um, glad I didn't shoot you in Babilar."

I smiled, yanking on first the right tensor glove, then the left.

"You going to be able to make it work?" Mizzy asked. "Without practice?"

The lights on the gloves lit up a deep green. I felt their hum course through me, a distant melody that had once been precious to me, yet one I'd somehow forgotten. I released it, reducing the stone wall nearby to a wave of dust.

"Feels like coming home," I said.

In fact, I felt almost good enough to face a High Epic.

45

I sprinted through the tunnel, passing shimmering rips on either side—windows to other worlds. Several were to Firefight's realm, but others—fainter, misty and less distinct—looked farther away. There were worlds where unfamiliar figures fought in these tunnels, or where the place was completely dark, and even worlds where there *were* no tunnels here, just rock.

The tensors hummed on my hands, eager. It was as if…as if the powers themselves knew I was trying to save Prof. They sang me a battle hymn. As I reached the chamber where I'd seen Prof earlier, I let out a burst of vibrating energy, dispelling the rock of a ledge before me, creating a set of dust-covered steps that I strode down.

Prof glowed green in the center of the chamber, the sleeves of his coat rolled back to expose forearms covered with dark hair. He turned on me, then laughed. "David Charleston," he said, his voice booming in the chamber. "Steelslayer! Come to finally take responsibility for what you began in Newcago? Have you come to *pay*?"

The floor here was pocked with tensor holes, and those alternated with piles of rubble and dust that had collapsed from the ceiling. Sparks. This place was a few breaths and a modest bass beat away from a cave-in.

I stepped up before him, hoping I could make the suit's forcefields work. Where was Megan? She'd be reborn if she'd died, so that didn't worry me as much as the existence of all these tears in reality.

One of them hovered nearby. Darkness visible only because of the shimmering at its sides.

Megan stepped out of it.

I jumped. Sparks, it was her, but a…strange version of her. Blurry.

Because it's not just one of her, I realized. I wasn't looking at one Megan, but hundreds. Overlapping one another, each similar but somehow individual. A freckle in a different place, hair that parted another way. Eyes too pale here or too dark there.

She smiled at me. A thousand smiles.

"I've got Abraham," Mizzy said. "He's alive, but it would be reaaaal nice if you kept the harmsway safe, David. If you want Abraham back to one piece, at least. Pulling out now."

"Roger," I said, looking at Prof. His clothing was dusty, ripped. He'd bled—and healed—from multiple cuts on his face. One hadn't healed, a place where Cody had hit him with the powers somehow.

Beleaguered though he was, Prof didn't seem afraid. He stood tall, confident. Four glowing lances of light appeared around him.

"The price, David," Prof said softly.

He released the lances, driving them toward me. I was able to vaporize them with the tensors, which shattered the forcefields to tiny specks. They sprayed across me before twinkling away. Not content to get pushed around, I charged Prof, trying to summon forcefields of my own.

All I got were a few shimmers of green, ripples like light reflecting off a pond. Crud.

Prof sent a second set of spikes, but—like Cody—I was familiar enough with the tensors to stop these as well. I leaped over a pit in the ground, then slammed my hand on the floor, opening up a gap with a blasting *humm.*

Prof dropped a mere inch before landing on a disc of green light. He shook his head, then flung his hand toward me, sending a gout of tensor energy that dropped the ground out from beneath me, as I'd done to him.

I frantically tried to create a forcefield to land on, but only got another shimmer of light. Then an instant later the hole wasn't as deep—and I hit bottom three feet down.

Megan stood beside the hole. "There are many worlds where he did not dig deep enough with that blast," she said, her voice overlapped by a hundred whispers.

Prof growled, charging me and summoning spears of light, one after another. I hopped out of the hole, falling in beside Megan, destroying the spikes where I could.

Each time I did so, Prof winced.

"So, how do we fight him?" Megan asked in overlapping voices. "All I've been able to do is distract him. Is the plan still to make him confront his fears somehow?"

"Not sure, honestly," I said, thrusting my hands in front of me and straining. Finally I produced a forcefield wall. It was kind of like using the tensors in reverse. Instead of releasing a hum, I let it build up inside me until it coalesced.

"How much can you alter?" I asked, looking at Megan.

"Little things," she said. "Reasonable things. My powers haven't changed, I just know them. David, I can see worlds…so many worlds." She blinked, an action that seemed to trail infinite shadows of eyelids. "But they're all ones that are nearby. It's amazing, yet frustrating. It's like I can count as many numbers as I want, but only if they happen to be between zero and one. Infinity, yet still bounded."

Prof shattered our forcefield, then raised his hands, causing the ceiling to shake. I summoned the tensor powers as I anticipated his move—indeed, he tried to bring the ceiling down on us by vaporizing a ring of rock, dropping a large stone in the center.

I vaporized the chunk right above us. We were showered with dust, and the way it fell on Megan proved she was here and real, not a shadow as a piece of me had feared.

Prof winced again.

I'm using his power. And it hurts.

"All right, I have a plan," I said to Megan.

"Which is?"

"To *run,*" I said, turning and dashing out of the main chamber into a side tunnel.

Megan cursed, following. We ran side by side and I engaged the tensors, vaporizing ribbons of stone along our path. I wasn't sure what I could do to change him or make him return to us. All of my plans had failed so far; the best thing I could do at the moment was keep the suit working and keep *him* in pain.

Behind us, Prof roared. He teleported in front of us, but I simply grabbed Megan by the hand and turned the other direction while disintegrating the forcefield Prof tried to use to trip us up. We ran into a tunnel without any light, but glowsticks appeared a second later, summoned

by Megan from a realm where Mizzy had lit this place.

When Prof teleported in front of us again, red-faced and snarling, I turned us back the other way, unrelentingly using the suit's powers on random stones we passed. Each use of the tensors was driving him further into a fury.

I've been here before, I thought, feeling the echoes of another event. Another fight. Driving an Epic to anger…

Prof appeared again, and this time Megan reacted first, yanking me to the side as spears of light—faster than I could track—struck like blades around us. Sparks! I barely stopped them. Maybe this wasn't such a good plan.

"This is always how you are!" Prof shouted. "No thought! No concern for consequences! Don't you worry about what will happen? Don't you ever think about *failure*?"

He teleported in front of us as we tried to flee, but a second later a rock wall created by Megan separated us.

"This isn't working," she said.

"Well, technically it is. I mean, my plan was just to run."

"Okay, I revise: this isn't going to work for very long. Sooner or later he'll trap us. What's your endgame?"

"Make him mad," I said.

"And?"

"Hope…um…that makes him afraid? We were desperate, scared, frantic when we faced our weaknesses. Maybe he has to be in the same state."

She gave me a skeptical look that—reflected through all of her shadows—was even more formidable than usual.

The wall near us melted away to powder. I gathered the energy of the tensors, preparing to be attacked by a series of forcefield spears, but Prof wasn't behind the wall anymore.

Huh?

He crashed into existence behind us and seized me by the arm with one hand. With the other, he tried to vaporize the motivators on my vest. I yelped and let out a blast of tensor power—directly down, carving out the rock beneath me and dropping me lower a few feet. The sudden motion lurched me out of Prof's grip and made his blast pass over my head.

I vaporized the ground below him, and by reflex he created a forcefield to stand on, so I wriggled through the dust underneath him. He had to twist to see me, but that left him open to Megan. Who, of course, shot him.

It didn't have much effect; he was protected—as always—by thin, invisible forcefields around his whole person. Her shots did distract him long enough for me to crawl out from underneath the disc on the other side. There, I raised my handgun and started firing as well.

He turned on me, annoyed, and I hit him with a blast of tensor power, dissolving his forcefields. Megan's gunshots began to chew chunks out of him, and he cursed, flashing away.

Megan stepped up to me, her face blurred by a hundred different identities. "We don't have the weakness right, David."

"His own powers *could* hurt him," I said. "And the tensor leaves him able to be shot."

"He heals from those shots immediately," she said, "and getting hit with tensor power doesn't disrupt his abilities as much as it should. It's like…we have *part* of the weakness right, but don't grasp the entire thing. And that's why he's not turning—confronting the powers must not be enough."

I couldn't argue. She was right. I sensed it inside, with a sinking feeling.

"So what now?" I asked. "Any ideas?"

"We have to kill him."

I drew my lips to a line. I wasn't sure we could do that. And even if we could kill him, it felt like in so doing, we might win the battle but lose the war.

Megan glanced at my gun. "You're reloaded, by the way."

My gun suddenly felt a bit heavier. "That's convenient."

"Can't help thinking there should be more I can do than reload guns and replace walls. I can see so much….It's overwhelming."

"We need to pick one thing for you to change," I said, holding my gun and watching for Prof to reappear. "Something very useful."

"A weapon," she said, nodding.

"Abraham's minigun?"

She smiled, then that smile became an almost girlish grin. "No. That's thinking too small."

"That gun is too *small*? Woman, I love you."

"Actually," she said, turning her head to look at something I couldn't

see, “there is a very close world where Abraham ran ops for our team….”

“What does that have to do with guns? You—”

I cut off as the cavern shook. I spun, then stumbled back as the entire *wall* of the tunnel—dozens of feet along—turned to dust in an incredible burst of power. Prof stood beyond, and he’d been busy. Hundreds of spears of light hovered around him.

We’d been talking. He’d been planning.

I shouted, thrusting my hand forward and releasing tensor power as the spears came for us. I got the first wave, and most of the second, but my blast ran out as the third bore down upon us.

They got caught in a reflective, silvery metallic surface that formed a shield in front of us. Megan grunted, holding the mercury steady, blocking the next two waves of impact.

“You see?” she said, now bearing the glove that controlled the rtich. “In a world where Abraham leads the team, someone else has to learn to use *this.*” She grinned, then grunted at another impact. “So…we going to bring him down?”

I nodded, feeling sick. “At the very least, we need him afraid. That’s the path that led us to change—we were terrified, facing death. Only when we were in serious danger did confronting our fears work.”

It felt wrong, like I was still missing something, but in the chaos of the moment it was the best I could do.

“Time to be a little brash?” she said, holding out the rtich in one hand, gun in the other.

“Foolhardy,” I agreed, hefting my own gun. “Reckless.”

I nodded to her, took a deep breath.

And we attacked.

Megan lowered her shield, letting the rtich crawl back up her arm. I sent out another wave of tensor power, and we ran through it, firing like madmen. The guns seemed mundane compared to the deific powers spinning about us, but they were familiar. Dependable. Solid.

We interrupted Prof in the middle of raising another wave of light spears. His eyes widened and his jaw lowered, as if he was befuddled to see the two of us coming right at him. He swept his hand forward, summoning a large forcefield to block us, but I crashed through it with a tensor burst, and Megan followed.

“Fine,” he said, pounding his hand into the ground. Rock vaporized around it, and he pulled out a large rod of stone. He stepped forward, slamming it toward Megan, who caught it on her arm with the rtich.

The mercury ran down onto Prof’s arm, holding him in place as I arrived to send a burst of tensor power at him, intending to follow it with a few shots to the face. Prof, however, matched my invisible blast with one of his own. They canceled one another out, crashing together with a sound that made my ears pop.

I skidded to a halt, then shot him in the face anyway. I mean, it had to be distracting, right? Even if the bullets bounced off? Maybe I could get one stuck in his nose or something.

He growled, yanking his fist free of the rtich and shoving Megan away. He swung his bar toward me, but I managed to vaporize it. Then I dumped about half a ton of dust on him from the ceiling, making him slip and stumble.

When he righted himself, Megan came in with the rtich coating her hand, arm, and side to give power—then slammed her fist into his face. Even with the forcefields, Prof cursed and stumbled backward. Megan came in, and he vaporized the ground in a deep hole that must have emptied into a cavern far beneath us, but Megan formed the rtich into a long rod and caught herself with it spanning the hole.

I slammed into Prof shoulder-first, sending him skidding through dust. I knelt, giving Megan a hand, and yanked her out of the hole.

Together, we went at him again. She’d apparently reloaded our guns, because I didn’t run out of bullets. And when Prof vaporized my gun, she tossed me another one, almost identical, that she’d pulled from an alternate dimension.

She was amazing with the rtich, commanding it along her body like a rippling second skin, blocking, attacking, bracing herself at other times. I kept Prof’s footing uneven and—when I could—vaporized his forcefields, letting us pound him with bullets.

The fight felt strangely perfect, for a time. Megan and I working side by side—voicelessly, each anticipating the other’s moves. Incredible powers at our disposal, weapons in our hands. Together we forced a much more experienced Epic to retreat. For a moment I let myself believe we would win.

Unfortunately, Prof’s healing powers kept spitting our bullets out. We

weren't negating those, not well enough. Megan shot for his head, not holding back, and I didn't stop her. But that attack failed like the others.

We ended up in one of the main chambers, dust dribbling around us. I withstood an assault by Prof's spears, grunting as one stabbed me in the shoulder. My motivator-aided healing powers let me recover. Megan stepped in, shielding me, but judging by the sweat dripping down her face, she was wearing down. I felt it too. Using the powers like this was taxing.

We braced ourselves, waiting for another attack from Prof. My gun clicked as Megan reloaded it, and I looked to her.

"Another attack?" she whispered.

I wasn't sure anymore. I tried to force out a reply, but then the ceiling caved in on us.

I stumbled, looking up, but Megan managed to turn the rtich to stop the sudden torrent of stone and dust. Garish sunlight streamed down out of the hole Prof had made, as wide as the entire cavern. I blinked, unaccustomed to the light, and looked at Prof, who had stepped out of the way of the downpour and now stood under the lip, in shadow.

"Fire," he said.

Only then did I notice that surrounding the perfect hole about thirty feet above was a squadron of fifty men and women.

They carried flamethrowers.

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FLAMES rained down toward us. They'd been prepared for this—we hadn't been forcing Prof to retreat. He'd been leading us by the nose!

The rtich vanished as the flames surrounded us. Megan's images and shadows all snapped together and there was suddenly one crisp version of her, lit by firelight. She threw herself to the ground as the sheets of flame fell.

"No!" I screamed, thrusting my hand toward her, my glove flashing. I couldn't afford to be bad at forcefields. Not now! I strained, like I was stretching to carry too heavy a weight.

Blessedly, a glowing protective dome appeared around Megan, blocking the flames. She pressed her hands against the shield I'd created, eyes wide as the entire thing was bathed in fire.

I stumbled back from the heat, my hand in front of my face. The fires got awfully close, but the burns I took healed.

Up above, men and women began firing automatic weapons. I screamed, releasing the tensor power and vaporizing the weapons in a wave of dust. Guns and flamethrowers crumbled. The gap above widened, raining down salt—and then people as their footing vanished beneath them.

The fires stopped falling, but the damage was done. Pools of liquid flame burned in the now-open cavern floor, curling black tongues of smoke toward the sky. It was so hot, sweat beaded on my forehead. Megan's powers would be worthless in here. I blinked against the dust and smoke as Prof emerged from the shadows—grim, bloodied, but still not afraid.

Sparks. Still not afraid.

"Did you think I wouldn't have a plan?" he said to me softly. "Did you

think I wouldn't prepare for Megan and her powers?" His feet ground against salt dust as he walked past a groaning soldier. "That's what you forget, David. A wise man *always* has a plan."

"Sometimes the plans don't work," I snapped. "Sometimes careful preparation isn't enough!"

"And so you storm in, taking no care?" he shouted, startlingly angry.

"Sometimes you just have to act, Prof! Sometimes you don't know what you need until you're in the thick of it!"

"That doesn't give you an excuse to upend another man's life! Doesn't give you an excuse to ignore everyone else to follow your own stupid passions! Doesn't excuse your complete *lack of control*!"

I roared, building a crescendo of tensor power. I didn't aim it toward the ground or the walls. I hurled it toward him: a charge of raw *power,* a vessel for my frustration, my anger. Nothing was working. Everything was falling apart.

It hit him, and he leaned back as if struck by something physical. Buttons on his shirt disintegrated.

Then Prof yelled and sent a blast of tensor power at me in return.

I hit it with my own. The two slammed against one another, like discordant sounds, and the cavern *shook,* stone rippling as if it were made of water. Vibrations washed over me.

The gun in my hand crumbled to dust, as did the tensor glove on the hand holding it. But the blast didn't reach the rest of me. Still, the shock of it knocked me off my feet.

I groaned and rolled over. Prof was there, looming above me. He reached down and grabbed the three boxes on the front of my vest, ripping them free of the fabric—removing the motivators from the tensor suit. "These," he said, "belong to *me.*"

No…

He backhanded me, a powerful blow that sent me sprawling across the rock and dust.

I came to rest near Megan, who was out of her protective dome—I was no longer holding the power to maintain it. She stood in the firelight, raised her gun in two hands, and shot at Prof.

A meaningless popping. Prof didn't even seem to care. I lay there with my arm buried in the mottled dust of the floor.

"You're fools," Prof said, tossing the motivators aside. "Both of you."

"Better a fool than a coward," I hissed. "At least I've tried to do something! Tried to change things!"

"You've tried and you've failed, David!" Prof said, stepping forward as Megan ran out of bullets. I could hear the anguish in his voice. "Look at you. You couldn't defeat me. You've *failed.*"

I rose to my knees, then settled back, feeling suddenly drained. Megan sank down beside me, burned, exhausted.

Perhaps it was the lack of the harmsway to prop me up. Perhaps it was the knowledge that at last we were done. But I didn't have the energy to rise. I barely had the energy to speak.

"We've been beaten, yes," Megan said. "But we haven't failed, Jonathan. Failure is refusing to fight. Failure is remaining quiet and hoping someone *else* will fix the problem."

I met his eyes. He stood about five feet before us in the cavern, which was now more of a crater. Ildithia's creeping salt crystals had begun to crawl over the rim of the hole, crusting over the sides. If other soldiers were up there, they'd wisely taken cover.

Prof's face was a network of cuts—injuries from debris blown by our violent explosion of tensor power, which had temporarily negated his forcefields. As if in defiance of my hopes, those wounds started to heal.

Megan…Megan was right. Something glimmered in my memories. "Refusing to act," I said to Prof, "yes, *that's* failure, Prof. Like…perhaps… refusing to enter a contest, even though you dearly wanted the prize?"

He stopped right in front of me. Tia had told me a story about him, when we were in Babilar. He'd wanted desperately to visit NASA, but wouldn't enter the contest that might have won him the chance.

"Yes," I said. "You never entered. Were you afraid to lose, Prof? Or were you afraid to *win*?"

"How do you know about that?" he demanded with a roar, summoning a hundred lines of light around him.

"Tia told me," I said, climbing to my knees, placing my hand on Megan's shoulder for support. It was starting to click. "You've always been like this, haven't you? You founded the Reckoners, but refused to push them too far. Refused to face the most powerful Epics. You wanted to help, Prof, but you weren't willing to take the last step." I blinked. "You were afraid."

The lines around him faded.

"The powers are part of it," I said. "But not the whole story. Why *do* you fear them?"

He blinked. "Because…I…"

"Because if you are so powerful," Megan whispered, "if you have all of these resources, then you don't have any excuses left for failing."

He started weeping, then gritted his teeth and reached for me.

"*You've* failed, Prof," I said.

The forcefields faded and he stumbled.

"Tia's dead," Megan added. "You failed her."

"Shut up!" The wounds on his face stopped healing. "Shut up, both of you!"

"You killed your team in Babilar," I said. "You failed them."

He lunged forward and seized me by the shoulders, knocking Megan aside. But he was trembling, tears streaming from his eyes.

"You were strong," I told him. "You have powers no others can match. And still you've failed. You've failed so deeply, Prof."

"I can't have," he whispered.

"You did. You know you did." I braced myself in his grip, preparing for the lie I spoke next. "We killed Larcener, Prof. You can't complete Regalia's plan. It doesn't matter if I die. You've *failed.*"

He dropped me. I stumbled up to my feet, but he sank to his knees. "Failed," he whispered. Blood dripped from his chin. "I was supposed to be a hero….I've had so much power…and I *still failed.*"

Megan limped up beside me, ashen-faced, rubbing her cheek where Prof had hit her. "Hell," she whispered. "It worked."

I looked at Prof. He still wept, but when he turned his face toward me, I saw pure loathing in his eyes. Hatred for me, for this situation. For being made a weak, common *mortal.*

"No," I said, my stomach sinking. "He didn't face it."

We'd found the true weakness. Tia had been wrong. His fear was something deeper than just the powers, though they—and his competence as a whole—were certainly part of that. He was afraid of stepping up, of becoming everything he could be—not because the powers themselves frightened him. But because if he tried, then the failure was far, far worse.

At least if he held something back and failed, he could tell himself it

wasn't completely his fault. Or that it was part of the plan, that he'd always intended for it to go this way. Only if he gave his all, only if he was using every resource he had, would the failure be complete.

What a terrible burden the powers were. I could see how they'd become a focus for him, how they represented the whole of his competence—and how they also represented his potential for true failure.

Megan pressed something into my hand. Her gun. I regarded it, then—my arm feeling like lead—I raised it to Prof's head.

"Do it," he growled. "Do it, you *bastard*!"

My hand was steady, my aim unwavering, as I rested my finger on the trigger—and *remembered.*

Another day, in a steel room, with a woman I'd driven to rage.

Me, kneeling on a gridiron battlefield.

My father, his back to the bank pillar, in the shadow of a deity.

"No," I said, turning away.

Megan didn't object. She joined me. Together, we walked away from Prof.

"Who's the coward now?" he demanded, kneeling in shadows and flickering firelight. Weeping. "David Charleston! Killer of Epics. You're supposed to *stop me.*"

"That," a new voice said, "can be arranged."

I turned, completely astonished, as *Larcener* strolled from the shadows of a stone overhang nearby. Had he been there all along? It defied reason. But—

He reached Prof and lightly rested his fingers on the man's neck. Prof screamed, going stiff.

"Like ice water in the veins, I'm told," Larcener said.

I charged toward them across the open cavern. "What are you doing?"

"Ending your problem," Larcener said, holding on to Prof. "You wish me to stop?"

"I…" I swallowed.

"Too late anyway," Larcener said, pulling his fingers away and inspecting them. He looked into Prof's eyes. "Excellent. It worked this time. I *did* need to check, after our little…problem with your girlfriend." He looked up at the sky, then glared at the sunlight, stepping back into the shadows. Sparks. The sun was low on the horizon; it had to be at least five by

now. I hadn't realized we'd been fighting so long.

I knelt down beside Prof. He was staring ahead, looking stunned. I prodded him softly, but he didn't move, didn't even blink.

"It's a good solution, David," Megan said, joining me. "It's either this or kill him."

I looked into those sightless eyes and nodded. She was right, but I couldn't help feeling that I'd failed in some monumental way. I'd fought Prof to a halt, figured out his weakness, and negated his powers. Yet he hadn't pushed back the darkness.

We could have found another method, right? Kept his weakness engaged until he came to himself? I wanted to weep—but strangely, I felt too tired even for that.

"Let's go find the others," I said, rising. I pulled off the vest, still with wires attached for the motivators. We'd need to get the harmsway running again to heal Abraham. I set it beside the metal boxes that held the motivators, then I scanned the sky, hoping to spot one of Knighthawk's drones.

A flash of light.

Obliteration's hand fell on my shoulder. "Well done," he said. "The beast is vanquished. It is time for me to make good on my promise."

We vanished.

47

WE appeared on a barren cliff overlooking a scrub desert with sweltering air that smelled of baked earth. Red rocks peeked from the soil, displaying a variety of strata, like pancakes piled high.

Behind me, something glowed brightly. I turned and raised my hand, squinting at it.

"A bomb," Obliteration said. "Made of my own flesh. My son, you might say."

"You used one of these to destroy Kansas City."

"Yes," he said, subdued. "I cannot travel well when full of energy. I must sun myself in the place I am to destroy, but that creates a conundrum. The more my notoriety grows, the more people flee my presence. And so…"

"And so you took Regalia's offer. Your flesh in exchange for a weapon."

"This one was for Atlanta," he said, then rested his hand on my shoulder in an almost paternal way. "I give it to you, Steelslayer. For your hunt. Can you use this to destroy the king above, the Epic of Epics?"

"I don't know," I said, eyes watering against the light. Sparks…I was so tired. Drained. Wrung out, like a threadbare dishrag so full of holes it was good for nothing more than propping up the corner of your wobbly kitchen table. "But if anything can do it, that will." Even powerful High Epics had been known to fall to overwhelming outpourings of energy like nukes, or Obliteration's own destructive force.

"I will take you, and it, to the palace above," he said. "The new Jerusalem. Detonate the bomb with this." He handed me a small rod, kind of

penlike, which was startlingly familiar. A universal detonator. I'd had one of these once.

"Could I…maybe do it from down here?" I asked.

Obliteration laughed. "You ask if you may set aside your cup? Only natural. But no, you must face this in person. I have extended your life to perform this act because I know its result. The detonator has a short range."

I gripped the detonator in a sweaty palm. A death sentence then. Perhaps the bomb could have been rigged with a timer, but I doubted Obliteration would agree to that.

I didn't even get to say goodbye to Megan, I thought, feeling sick. Yet here was the chance I'd insisted I sought. An ending.

"Can I…think about it?"

"For a short time," he said, checking the sky. "But not long. He will soon rise, and we cannot let him see what we are planning."

I sat down, trying to clear my mind, trying to recover some strength and confront the opportunity I'd been handed. I tried to sort through it. Prof defeated, but drained of powers. He'd seemed so numb when I'd looked at him, as if he'd been hit by some strong blow to the head. He'd recover, right? Some assumers left their prey stunned, even brain-dead, after their powers were taken. Those people recovered when the powers were restored, but Larcener never gave back what he stole. How had I never considered that?

Sparks, how had I missed Prof's weakness? His timid planning, the way he looked for excuses to give away his powers and mitigate failures—it all pointed to his fears. All along, he'd been unwilling to fully commit.

"Well?" Obliteration finally asked. "We have no more time."

I didn't feel any more rested, despite the breather. "I'll go," I whispered, hoarse. "I will do it."

"Well chosen." He led me to the bomb that, I assumed, had been placed here in this wasteland to gather heat from the sun. I moved closer to it and got a sense of its shape—a metal box about the size of a footlocker. It wasn't hot, though it seemed as if it should be.

Obliteration knelt and put one hand on it; the other he placed on my arm. " 'You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.' Farewell, Steelslayer."

My breath caught as I was seized in the flash of light. A second later, I found myself looking down at Earth.

I barely heard the crash behind me as Obliteration left, abandoning me. I

was in *space*. I knelt on what appeared to be a surface of glass, looking down at a gloriously stomach-twisting sight: the Earth in its splendor, surrounded by a haze of atmosphere and clouds.

So peaceful. From up here, my daily concerns seemed insignificant. I tore my eyes away from that sight to look around, though I had to put my back to the bomb and squint to make anything out over its light. I was in some kind of…building, or ship? With glass walls?

I stumbled to my feet, noting the walls' rounded corners, and a distant red light somewhere in this glassy structure. Then I realized that despite the fact that I was all the way up in space, my feet remained planted on the surface beneath me. I would have expected to float.

The bomb shone like a star behind me. I fingered the detonator. Should I…do it now?

No. No, I needed to see him first. Up close. He glowed crimson, bright as the bomb, but was somewhere ahead of me in the ship, his light refracting through corners and surfaces of glass.

My eyes were gradually adjusting, and I noticed a doorway. I stumbled toward it, as the floor was uneven, lined with ladderlike grips and bars. The walls were also uneven, made of different compartments filled with wires and levers—only it was all glass.

I passed through a corridor, with difficulty. There was something etched into one wall, and I ran my hand over it. English letters? I could read them—some kind of company name, it seemed.

Sparks. I was in the old international space station, but it had been transformed into glass.

Feeling an unreal disconnect, I continued toward the light. The glass was so clear, I could almost believe that it wasn't there. I stumbled through room after room, my arm out to make sure I didn't walk into a wall, and the red light grew larger.

I eventually stepped into one last room. It was bigger than the others I'd passed through, and Calamity waited on the far side—facing away from me, I thought, though he was so bright it was difficult to make out much about him.

Arm raised against the light, I clutched the detonator tighter. I was being stupid. I should have blown the bomb. Calamity might kill me the moment he saw me. Who knew what powers this being had?

But I *had* to know. *Had* to see him with my own eyes. I had to meet the thing that had ruined my world.

I walked through the room.

Calamity's light dimmed. My breath caught in my throat, and I tasted bile. What would the people below think? Calamity going out? The light lowered to a faint glow, revealing a young man in a simple robe, with red glowing skin. He turned to face me…and I knew him.

"Hello, David," Larcener said.

48

"YOU," I whispered. "You were down below! With us, all along!"

"Yes," Larcener said, turning to regard the world. "I can project a decoy of myself; you know this. You even mentioned the power on several occasions."

I reeled, trying to connect it all. He'd been with us.

Calamity had been *living with us.*

"Why…What…"

Larcener sighed, a shockingly human sound. Annoyance. An emotion I'd felt from him quite often. "I keep looking at it," he said, "trying to find what you see in it."

I hesitantly stepped up beside him. "The world?"

"It's broken. Terrible. *Horrid.*"

"Yeah," I said softly. "Beautiful."

He looked at me, narrowing his eyes.

"You're the source of it all," I said, resting my fingers on the glass in front of me. "You…all along…The powers you stole from other Epics?"

"I simply took back what I once gave," he said. "Everyone was so quick to believe in an Epic who could steal abilities, they never realized they'd had it backward. I'm no thief. 'Larcener,' they called me. Petty." He shook his head.

I swallowed, blinking. "Why?" I asked Calamity. "Please, tell me. *Why* have you done this?"

He mused, hands clasped behind him. It *was* Larcener. Not only the

same face, but the same mannerisms. The same way he sniffed before speaking, as if forming words to speak with me were beneath him.

"You are to destroy yourselves," he said quietly. "I am but the harbinger; I bring the powers. You use them and orchestrate your own end. It is what we have done in countless realms. I'm…told."

"You're told? By who?"

"It is a wonderful place," he said, as if he hadn't heard me. "You wouldn't be able to comprehend it. Peace. Softness. No terrible lights, no lights at all. We don't sense with horrid appendages like *eyes.* We live there, as one, until our duty arrives." He sneered. "And this is mine. So I came here and left it all. And exchanged it for…"

"Harsh lights," I said. "Loud sounds. The pain of heat, of sensation."

"Yes!" he said.

"Those aren't *my* nightmares," I said, raising my hand to my head. "They're *yours.* Sparks…they're *all* yours, aren't they?"

"Don't be foolish. Babbling about your silly notions again."

I stumbled back, catching myself on a boxy protrusion from the wall. I could see it in my nightmares. Visions of being born in this world, a place so foreign to Calamity. To his senses, a terrible place.

The harsh lights of my nightmares were no more than common ceiling lights.

The clatter and yells? People talking, or the thumps of furniture moving.

The terrible nature of it was all in comparison to where he'd lived before. Another place, one I couldn't comprehend, one that lacked such intense stimuli.

"Were you supposed to leave us?" I asked.

Calamity didn't reply.

"Calamity! After you granted our powers, were you supposed to leave?"

"Why would I remain in this terrible place longer than I had to?" he said, dismissive.

"In Megan's parallel world," I whispered. "There you *did* leave, and the darkness never claimed the Epics. Here, you remained…and you *infected* us somehow. Your hatred, your loathing. You turned each Epic into a copy of you, Calamity."

Megan had said that her fear of flames hadn't been nearly as pronounced before her powers arrived. My fear of the depths had started

once his eyes turned upon me. Whatever Calamity did, whatever he was, when he wormed his way into someone, he *magnified* their terrors to an unnatural level.

And when people were exposed to those fears—the things he hated—Calamity withdrew. Gone were the powers, and gone was the darkness.

Confronting the fears, that worked into it too somehow. It had to. When you confronted your fears, what happened?

They are mine, Megan had said. *I claim them.*

Sparks. Did that mean she had seized the powers and cast out Calamity fully? Separated them from the darkness?

"You all make so many excuses," Calamity said. "You refuse to see what your people are, once they get a little power." He looked at me. "What *you* are, David Charleston. You have hidden it from the others, but you cannot fool the source himself. I know what you are. When will you release it? When will you *destroy,* as is your destiny?"

"I never will."

"Nonsense! It is your nature. I've seen it over and over again." He stepped toward me. "How did you do it? How did you hold me off so long?"

"Is that why you came to us?" I asked. "In Ildithia? Because of me?"

Calamity glowered at me. Even now, even seeing him in his glory, I had the same impression of him I'd always had: that of a great spoiled child.

"Calamity," I said, "you have to go. Leave us."

He sniffed. "I am not allowed to go until my work is done. They made that clear, after I—"

"What?"

"I do not see *you* answering the questions I gave you," he said, then turned back to look out his window. "Why have you denied your powers?"

I licked my lips, heart thumping. "I can't be an Epic," I said. "My father was waiting for them…."

"So?"

"I…" I trailed off. I couldn't voice it.

"Eleven years, and still your kind lingers," Calamity muttered. "Dwindling, yes, but also *lingering.* Ten years as a child I lived among you, until I fled to this place."

That's when Calamity rose, I thought. *When he was ten—and when he decided to start giving away powers.*

“This place,” Calamity said, “which is closer to my home than anything else in this rotten realm. But…I found I had to start going down again, among you. I had to know. What did you see in all of this? Eleven years more, and I haven’t been able to find it….”

I looked down at the thin detonator rod still clenched in my hand. I had my answers. They raised more questions, true. What *was* the place he had come from? Why did his kind seek to destroy us? He acted like it was predetermined, but by who, and why?

Questions I would probably never see answered. My single regret was that I hadn’t said goodbye to Megan. I would have liked one last, farewell kiss.

My name is David Charleston.

I clicked the button.

And I kill Epics.

The bomb detonated.

49

THE explosion ripped through the glass space station, shattering it to pieces. The heat and force hit me in an instant, then *curved* around me. It streamed into Calamity's outstretched palm, sucked like water through a straw.

It was over in an eyeblink. Behind me, the station reknit itself, glass forming back together, resealing.

I stood like an idiot, clicking the button again and again.

"You thought," Calamity said without looking at me, "that my own power could destroy me? I suppose there would be a poetry to that. But I am master of the powers, David. I know them all, in their intricacy. Yes, I could tell you how Ildithia works. Yes, I could explain what Megan does in jumping to other realms—both core possibilities and ones ephemeral. But I am *truly* immortal. None of the powers could harm me, not permanently."

I sank to the floor. The strain of it all overwhelmed me. The fight with Prof. Being stolen away by Obliteration. Pressing that button and being prepared to die.

"I've wondered if I should simply tell them," Calamity mused, and turned to me. "You should understand that you need to destroy yourselves. But you see, I am not supposed to interfere. Even the small infractions—like being forced to make devices for your assault on Sharp Tower—worry me. It is against our way, though maintaining my cover required it."

"Calamity, you're *already* interfering. Deeply. You make them go mad! You make them destroy!"

He ignored me.

Sparks…how could I get him to see? How could I show him that *he* was causing the darkness and destruction, that men wouldn't take to it as naturally as he claimed?

"You are worthless, as a whole," he said softly. "You *will* destroy yourselves, and I will bear witness. I will not shirk my duty as others have. We are to watch, as is our calling. But I must not interfere, not again. The acts of youth can be forgiven. Though I was never truly a child, I *was* new. And your world is a shock. A dreadful shock." He nodded, as if convincing himself.

I forced myself to stand. Then I slipped my gun from its holster on my leg.

"Your answer to everything, David Charleston?" Calamity said with a sigh.

"Worth a try," I said, raising the gun.

"I contain the very powers of the universe. Do you understand that? They are *all mine.* I am what you call a High Epic a thousand times over."

"You're a monster either way," I said. "Divine powers don't make you a god, I guess. They make you a bully who happens to have the biggest gun."

I pulled the trigger. The gun didn't even fire.

"I removed the powder," Calamity noted. "Nothing you can possibly do—whether the result of Epic powers or the craftiness of men—can hurt me." He hesitated. "You, however, have no such protections."

"Um…," I said.

Then I ran.

"Really?" he asked after me. "This is what we're doing?"

I tore out of the room, scrambling back the way I'd come, which was tough considering that this place had been made for people who moved in freefall, not people who walked.

I reached the room where I'd first arrived. Dead end.

Calamity sprang into existence near me.

I swallowed, my mouth dry. "Noninterference, right?"

"Of course, David," Calamity said. "Though you did break the station. I needn't save you from…the natural result of your actions. This place can be so fragile." He smiled.

I lunged for a handgrip on the floor—just in time, as a large hole opened in the side of the room. The wind howled.

“Goodbye, David Charleston,” Calamity said, strolling over to kick at my fingers.

Light flashed in the room.

Then someone *punched* Calamity square in the face, sending him sprawling. The rushing of air stopped, and I gasped in a huge breath, looking up at the newcomer.

Prof.

He wore his black lab coat and no longer bore the vacant look that had been in his eyes when I’d left him. It was replaced by an expression of determination and sheer grit.

“You,” Calamity said, sprawled on his back. “I reclaimed the powers from you!”

Prof pulled apart his lab coat. There, strapped to his chest, was the vest that Knighthawk had made, quickly repaired, motivators replaced.

“Useless!” Calamity said. “If I reclaimed them, that shouldn’t work. It…I…” He looked, befuddled, at the forcefield on the wall, which glowed green.

Prof offered me his hand.

I let out a long sigh of relief. “How do you feel?” I asked, taking the hand.

“Haunted,” he whispered. “Thank you for bringing me back. I hate you for it, David. But *thank you.*”

“I didn’t bring you back,” I said. “You faced it, Prof.” I suddenly understood—in strapping on the motivators and trying to take up his powers again after what had happened, he’d faced them. He’d come to risk failure. He’d *done* it.

He’d claimed the powers. Like Megan, he’d ripped the darkness from the abilities, and sent one sprawling away while seizing the others.

Prof’s powers were now his, and not Calamity’s. The motivator boxes were meaningless.

Prof grabbed me, perhaps intending to teleport us away, but a sudden wave of *something* slammed into us, sending us sprawling. Calamity started glowing again, a harsh red light, and he spoke….Sparks, that *voice.* Inhuman, unreal.

Something tumbled from Prof’s hand, and it vaporized as Calamity pointed.

“What was that?” I asked over the terrible screeching that was now Calamity’s voice, speaking a language I couldn’t conceive.

“That *was* our way out,” Prof said. “Run.”

The teleporter. Hell. I scrambled to my feet as Prof placed a forcefield between us and Calamity, but it was gone in a heartbeat. Fighting him was impossible, it—

Some unseen force tossed me to the ground. Calamity glowed and raised his hands, a beam forming, then shooting right toward me.

Light flashed again, and the beam missed.

Megan stood in the room, holding Obliteration by the throat. He appeared to be choking. I gaped in surprise as she tossed the man aside—he vanished a moment later, not in his customary fashion, but just fading away. Megan raised her gun and started firing at Calamity. It still didn’t do any good, though Calamity screamed again in that strange language.

Megan cursed and dropped down to a crouch beside me. “Plan?” she asked.

“I…Megan, how did you…”

“Easy,” she said, firing again. “Grabbed the Obliteration from the other dimension, showed him the picture of this place, and made him take me up here. He’s still a slontze there, I’ll have you know. Now…plan?”

Plan.

Sometimes you don’t know what you need until you’re in the thick of it.

“Send us both,” I said, stumbling to my feet. “Send Calamity and me into Firefight’s world—but not out in space, please. Send us to Firefight, wherever he is.”

“David, Calamity will kill you!”

“Please, Megan. Please. Trust me.”

She drew her lips to a line, and as I lurched toward Calamity in the shaking room, she released her powers.

I grabbed him, and together the two of us slipped into another place.

50

WE stumbled onto a rooftop in Ildithia, near a gaping hole smoldering in the ground. Night had fallen; darkness covered the salt city, but I recognized the location. It was above where I'd faced down Prof at the end.

At first I thought something had gone wrong. Had we really entered another dimension? But there *were* differences. Here, the hole looked like it had been made by an explosion rather than by the tensors. There were also far fewer bodies.

I turned and found that Calamity was standing there growling at me. He raised his hands, summoning light.

"I can show you," I whispered, "what it is we see in the Earth. You say you're curious. I can show you something you will wish to see. I *promise.*"

He sneered at me. But as I watched, his rage seemed to subside. Like… well, like an Epic when their powers retreated.

"You're curious," I said. "I know you are. Don't you want to understand, finally, so that your curiosity will stop nagging at you?"

"Bah," he said, but lowered his hands and transformed into Larcener. Well, he'd always been Larcener, but he'd stopped glowing, his skin had returned to a human tone, and his robe had transformed to the shirt and slacks he often wore.

"What do you think to do here?" he demanded, looking around. "This is another Core Possibility, isn't it? One adjacent to yours? You realize I can just send us back."

"Specks!" Firefight's voice said. I twisted to find him on the next rooftop over, standing near Tavi. She remained behind, studying me while

Firefight jumped, gliding across the open space, trailing flames. “He’s here!” Firefight said, obviously speaking into a mobile. How had he found one that didn’t burn up? “Yes, *him.*”

“Can you summon the person who wants to meet me?” I asked Firefight, glancing toward Calamity.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Firefight said. “He’s coming.”

“There *is* something strange about this place,” Calamity said, looking up and squinting at the sky. “Something wrong…”

“It’s a world that you left, Calamity,” I said. “It’s a world where some Epics don’t destroy. Where some protect and fight against those who would kill.”

“Impossible.” He spun on me. “Lies.”

“You know your powers,” I said. “You know what Megan does. You told me yourself, you are their master. Before, you demanded that I deny what I was. Well, I don’t, not anymore. I’m one of you. Now *you* do it! I dare you to deny what you’re seeing. *Deny* that this place, this possibility, exists!”

“I…” He seemed bewildered. He looked up at the dark sky, where Calamity should have been. “I…”

Powerful spotlights lit the area nearby, where people searched for survivors in the aftermath of whatever conflict Firefight and his team had faced. Down below, when people saw him standing near me, they cheered.

Sparks, they *cheered* an Epic.

“No…,” Calamity said. He looked at Firefight, then the people. “This one must…he must be an anomaly…like your Megan….”

“Is that so?” I said, scanning the area. I spotted a figure rising from the city, the figure I’d been waiting for. He streaked toward us, cape fluttering behind. An outfit I knew all too well.

I seized Calamity by the front of his clothing. “Look at it!” I said. “Look at a place where the Epics are free from your corruption. Look at the one who comes, the most terrible of them all. A murderer in our world, a destroyer. Look and see that here, Calamity, *Steelheart himself is a hero!*”

I thrust my hand to the side as the figure landed on the rooftop.

“That…,” Calamity said. “That is not Steelheart.”

What?

I looked at the figure again. Magnificent silver cape. Baggy black pants, a shirt stretched taut across a powerful physique. It was Steelheart’s costume,

though it now bore a symbol on the chest. That was the only difference in the clothing.

But his face…his face was that of a kindly man, not a tyrant. Round features, thinning hair, a wide smile, and such understanding eyes.

Blain Charleston.

My father.

51

"MY David," Father whispered. "My little *David*…"

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. It was him. In this world, my father was an Epic.

No, in this world, my father was *the* Epic.

He took a hesitant step forward, such a timid action for one who bore the musculature, stature, and regal air of a powerful Epic. "Oh, son. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I released Calamity, stunned. Father took another step forward, then I seized him in an embrace.

It all came out. The worry, the terror, the frustration and mind-numbing exhaustion. It poured out in heaving sobs.

I released over a decade of pain and sorrow, a decade of loss. He held me tight, and he smelled like my father, Epic or not.

"Son," he said, clutching me, weeping. "I killed you. I didn't mean to. I tried to protect you, to save you. But you died. You died anyway."

"I let you die," I whispered. "I didn't help you, didn't stand up. I watched him murder you. I was a coward."

Our words became a jumble as we spoke. But for a moment, somehow, everything was all right. I was in my father's arms. Impossible, yet true.

"But…it *is* him," Calamity whispered from behind. "I can see the powers. The same powers."

I finally released my father, though he kept a grip on my arm, protective. Calamity stared at the sky again.

"You brought him here?" my father said.

Calamity nodded absently.

"Thank you, hero," my father said, speaking with a confidence I hadn't known in him since before Mother's death. "Thank you for giving me this gift. You must be a mighty man of compassion in your realm."

Calamity looked at us, frowning. From my father, to me, and back.

"By the Eternal Sparks," Calamity whispered. "I *see* it."

I felt the fading sensation. Megan's power was running out, and we would soon return.

I grabbed my father again. "I'm going," I said. "I don't have a choice. But…Father, I forgive you. Know that I forgive you." It didn't need to be said, yet I knew that I *had* to say it.

"I forgive you," Father said, tears in his eyes. "My David…it is enough to know that somewhere, you still live."

The world faded, and with it my father. I anticipated pain, a lurching, a tearing away—but I felt only peace.

He was right. It was enough.

Calamity and I reappeared on the glass space station. Megan and Prof stood at the ready, her with her gun, Prof with spears of light. I raised my hands to still them.

Calamity remained in his human form. He didn't change back; he simply knelt on that glass floor, staring sightlessly. A small red glow finally started to rise from him, and he looked at us.

"You are evil," he said, almost a plea.

"I am *not,*" Megan said.

"You will…you will destroy everything…," he said.

"No," Prof said, his voice rough. "No."

Calamity focused on me, standing with the other two.

"Your corruption isn't enough," I said. "Your fears are not enough. Your hatred is not enough. We won't do it, Calamity."

He wrapped his arms around himself and began to rock.

"Do you know what made the difference?" I demanded of him. "The reason our powers separated from yours? The same thing happened with all of us. Megan running into a burning building. Me entering the ocean. Edmund with the dog. And Prof coming here. It wasn't only confronting the fears…"

"…it was pushing through them," Calamity whispered, looking from me to the others, "to save someone."

"Do you fear that?" I asked him softly. "That we aren't what you've thought? Does it terrify you to know that deep down, men are not monsters? That we are, instead, inherently good?"

He stared at me, then collapsed, curling up on the glass floor. The red light within him dimmed, and then—just like that, he faded away. Until there was nothing.

"Did we…kill him?" Megan asked.

"Close enough," I said.

The station rumbled, then lurched.

"I *knew* this thing was too low for such an orbital speed!" Prof shouted. "Sparks. We need to call Tia and…" He grew pale.

The entire station lurched, throwing us to the ceiling. Calamity had been holding it in place. It started to crack, glass all around spiderwebbing from the internal pressure. In seconds we were plummeting toward the Earth, the station shattering around us.

But I was calm.

For in that other world, my father's shirt had borne a symbol. A symbol I recognized—a stylized S shape. A symbol that meant something.

The symbol of the Faithful.

There will be heroes. Just wait.

I seized the power within me.

Epilogue

I sat on the hillside, resting in the shadow of the fallen space station—which I'd transformed to steel as we fell. I'd made the transformation, then exited through one of the holes in its side. I'd grabbed hold, slowing it, then guided it out of its death spiral and eventually placed it here.

Well…*crashed* it here. Turns out flying is way harder than people think. In the air, I was about as adroit as seventeen geriatric walruses trying to juggle live swordfish.

Might need to work on that one.

Megan walked over, looking radiant as always, despite the bruises from the, um, smoothness-challenged landing. She sat down and squeezed my arm.

"So," she said, "you going to get super buff?"

"Dunno," I said, flexing. "Steelheart was, and my father is. Might come with the portfolio."

"Should make up for the terrible kissing."

"Hey, all you have to do to fix that is let me practice."

"Noted."

We were somewhere in Australia, according to Knighthawk, who was sending a copter for us. It would be hours before it arrived. I wasn't about to trust my flying skills to get us back to North America.

I nodded toward the other hillside. "How is he?"

"Bad," Megan said, looking toward Prof's silhouette, where he sat staring into the sky. "He'll have to live with it, as I do. The things we've

done while consumed by the darkness…well, they *feel* like our own actions. Dreamlike, sometimes, but still our choice. You can remember enjoying it too…."

She shivered, and I pulled her close. After this, Prof would never be the same. But then, would any of us?

"His powers still work?" I said. "Like yours do?"

She nodded, glancing at her mobile. "Abraham and Cody are doing well, though Prof will need to regrow Abraham's arm. And…um…you should read this." She showed me a message she had pulled up from Knighthawk.

"Mizzy?" I asked.

Megan nodded.

"Sparks. I wonder how she'll take to being an Epic."

"Well, without the darkness…" Megan shrugged.

It was well and truly gone, so far as we could tell. Megan still thought Calamity might return. I didn't.

A flash of light appeared in front of us, resolving into a man with spectacles and a goatee, wearing a trench coat.

"Ah!" Obliteration said. "You *are* here." He tucked away the mobile he'd been carrying.

Hmm, maybe we wouldn't need that copter after all. I took a deep breath and stood, hopeful. I gave Obliteration a smile and reached out my hand to him.

He slid his sword from its sheath—yes, he still had a sword—and pointed it at me. "You have done well, and blessed are you, for you have cast the dragon from his heaven. I will give you a week to recover. My next target is Toronto. You may face me there, and we shall see what comes of our clash, horseman."

"Obliteration," I said, pleading. "Calamity is gone."

"Yes," he said, sheathing his sword.

"The darkness is gone," I said. "You don't have to be evil."

"I'm not," he said. "I thank you for giving me the secrets you know, Steelslayer. I know why the darkness left me five years ago, when I faced my fear. I have been free of it ever since." He nodded to me. " 'And he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.' "

He flashed into white ceramic and vanished.

"Calamity," I said, slumping back down, frustrated. *"Calamity."*

"You know," Megan said, "we might need to think of new curses."

"I had hoped, maybe, on our side he would be good. Once Calamity was gone."

"They're people," Megan said. "Free to be people, David. As it should be. And that means some of them are still going to be selfish, or messed up, or whatever."

She settled closer to me. "I'm feeling rested, and am up for some exertion."

I grinned. "Practice!"

She rolled her eyes. "Not that I'm averse, Knees, but I was referring to my powers."

Oh, right. I knew that.

"You still want to try this?" she asked.

"Yeah, absolutely. He'll be waiting."

"All right. Sit still."

A moment later, I was back in the other world. I'd returned once already. Just after we'd landed the space station, I'd popped in to let them know that my visit before hadn't been the end—but I'd stayed only for a moment. Megan had been tired.

Before I'd left though, I'd arranged this meeting place. My father stood on top of a building. Sharp Tower, which hadn't been destroyed in his world. I walked up to him, noting his fluttering cape. *Look what those comic books have done to you.* Wearing a symbol and everything? Sparks, he was such a nerd.

Like father, like son, I guess.

He saw me, and turned around with a wide smile of his own. I stepped toward him, hesitant. Eleven years—a long time to catch up on. How did one begin?

"Um," I said, "Megan feels she's getting better at this, and the darkness is gone, so she can last longer. Now that she's rested, and isn't in the middle of a catastrophe or anything, she thinks she can give us a good fifteen minutes. Maybe as long as a half hour."

"Good, good," Father said. He shuffled awkwardly. "Uh, Firefight tells me that you and I share a power set."

“Yeah,” I said. “Power blasts, invulnerability. Oh, and turning stuff into steel. Not sure how useful that last one will be.”

“You’d be surprised,” he said.

“It’s still going to take some getting used to. And by the way, flying is kind of kicking me in the face.”

“Flying is tricky at first.”

We stood in front of one another, uncertain, until Father nodded toward the railing. “Do you…maybe…want me to teach you?”

I smiled, feeling a sudden warmth deep inside. “Dad, I can think of nothing I’d like more.”

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Brandon Sanderson

BRANDON SANDERSON is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Reckoners series—which includes *Steelheart, Firefight, Calamity*—and the internationally bestselling Mistborn series, and he was chosen to complete Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time series. His books have been published in more than twenty-five languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide.

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